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SOME LIKE THE HILLS

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SOME LIKE THE HILLS

*A Romance of
The North-West Frontier of India*

BY
RONALD DUNCAN



~~Price Rs. 2-8~~

BOMBAY.
THACKER & Co.. LTD.
1944

PUBLISHED 1939 (LONDON)
FIRST INDIAN EDITION MARCH 1944

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*Set and printed in India by
R Boudon at Western Printers & Publishers' Press,
15-23, Hamam Street, Fort, Bombay,
and Published by C. Murphy, Manager,
Thacker & Co., Ltd., Rampart Row, Bombay*

TO
BRENDA
With much love

This novel is developed from some short stories by the author, originally published, some in Chambers's Journal and others in the Illustrated Weekly of India. The author wishes to thank the editors for permission to use them.

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Chapter 1

THE RAID

IT was June in Tirah and the temperature was well over 100° in the shade. In this land of the Afridis on the North-West Frontier of India, a Pathan youth wandered slowly along a hill track in the sweltering heat. He was tall, loose limbed and powerfully broad at the shoulders, and he carried himself superbly, but unhappiness and discontent lay in his eyes and on his handsome, brooding face. There was something about the slowness of his movements that gave the impression of the futility of life in general. Mira Baz, Zakka Khel Afridi, was in love.

Love is always apt to be disturbing, but in this case it was more than usually so. The girl, for whom his heart craved and of whom he thought by day and dreamt by night, was the daughter of an influential and extremely powerful Afridi Malik named Lal Mast, and the chance of winning her seemed to Mira Baz well nigh impossible. With the impetuosity of youth, he felt he could not live without her. For the time being, she was the sole reality of his life.

Things had gone well for Lal Mast. His village with its two watch towers was quite one of the finest in the Bazar Valley and he had also a large house in the uplands at Maidan. He was rich and owned much land and

cattle, but he was a miser. Some time ago, he had made up his mind that when his only daughter, Ziargula, married, she should be wedded to a man of means, who was in a position to pay a high bride price for her. He could see no reason for letting her go to a poor man. Naturally, there were many suitors for her hand, as the girl was comely, so he was in the fortunate position of being able to pick and choose his future son-in-law.

On the other hand, the parents of Mira Baz were poor and lived a hand to mouth sort of existence. Therein lay the trouble. Once upon a time, the family had been well-to-do and a power in the land, but fate had been unkind, and a blood feud, which had lasted many years, had reduced them in numbers and sadly impoverished them from a financial point of view. Owing to the machinations of their enemies, their own village, of which they had been so proud, was now nothing more than a heap of ruins and they had been forced to live in an insignificant house at China, the only town of any size in Bazar, tucked away under the hills at the north-west corner of the valley.

So Malik Lal Mast did not favour the suit of Mira Baz. In fact, he went further than that. He sent a peremptory message to tell him that if he was seen in the company of his daughter, he would be shot dead.

The pity of the whole thing was that the girl herself was consumed with a great love for Mira Baz, and that was scarcely to be wondered at. He was a magnificent type of Afridi manhood and a fit mate for any Pathan girl—tall, lithe and strong with the clear-cut, hawk-like features one finds so often in

the trans-border Pathan. Altogether the kind of man who attracts women, but girls across the border seldom dare to go against the wishes of their parents.

Mira Baz had met her for the first time quite by chance. She was drawing water from a spring close to her village and he had happened to pass by. She had looked up at him ; for a moment their eyes met and she smiled. That moment was the undoing of Mira Baz.

He spent all his time visualizing her beauty: the sweet, oval-shaped face; the delicately curved red lips; the softness of her eyes; the slender contours of her body. Her appearance completely obsessed his mind to the exclusion of all else, and he felt that life was unendurable without her.

There had been more than one meeting. The following day he had purposely walked past the spring at the same hour and again she was there. Perhaps, woman-like, she had a shrewd intuition that he would revisit the scene. Once more she had looked up into his face and smiled. Furtively he had glanced round to make sure that no one was looking and then, reassured, he had moved close to her.

‘Beloved,’ he whispered. ‘I must see more of you.’

‘My lord,’ had been the answer, very low, her eyes to the ground.

‘What is your name ?’

‘Ziarigula.’ He could only just hear the word, so softly was it spoken.

‘Where and when can I meet you again, Ziarigula ?’ he had asked. ‘Quick. Tell me. Someone approaches.’ She had named a meeting-place and departed hurriedly.

‘So be it,’ Mira Baz had whispered to her. ‘There is no life without you.’

Since that day they had often met secretly, so that Mira Baz felt that his soul was scorched by a flame of love and desire. He had more than once urged her to run away with him, but such was the fear of her father that, despite his pleadings, she would not succumb to the temptation of flight. She well knew her father’s ruthless cruelty. If she married against his wishes, he would never rest content until he had made them both pay to the uttermost for their folly. No, she said, she would never consider the proposition. It was beyond the bounds of sanity.

Time after time had Mira Baz pleaded with her, using every wile known to him and bringing every argument he could think of to persuade her; cajoling her; getting angry; taunting her; flattering her, her mind definitely made up, her answer had been invariable.

Apparently Malik Lal Mast had got wind of these secret meetings, for he had put his foot down and issued an ultimatum to Mira Baz.

So Mira Baz was unhappy in his love. Unless a miracle happened, Ziarigula would go to another, and the mere thought of such a dire happening filled him with black jealousy and hate. He coveted her more than he had ever wanted anything in his young life and his heart was in a great torment. Until this trouble came upon him, he had been a happy, carefree youth, popular with all the young bloods of the valley, but now he found their gay society intolerable, and his friends considered him sulky and disagreeable. He would avoid the others whenever he could. As he

wandered gloomily over the hill-sides, looking after the few cattle and sheep his parents still possessed, loneliness, jealousy and a hopeless love were his sole companions.

He knew that Malik Lal Mast would not hesitate to carry out his threat of shooting him if he disregarded the order and met the girl. Mira Baz was quite sure of that. The taking of life across the border, where the King's writ does not run and the tribesmen acknowledge no rule except that of the rifle and the sword, is a matter of small account. So, although he was very far from being a coward, he had enough sense to keep away from Ziarigula for the time being. Sometimes he would graze his animals on the slope of a hill overlooking Lal Mast's village. On these occasions, he would hang about until he got a glimpse of her going to fetch water from a spring near by, but that was cold comfort.

The following evening, Mira Baz was driving his cattle home after a lonely day on the hill-side. The sun was slowly sinking and the hills, behind which it was setting, were a lovely purple whilst the ground was drenched in a golden light, almost as if it was lighted from within.

As he rounded a corner, he came upon a group of about twenty-five young men sitting on the ground in a circle and talking earnestly together. In his bitter state of mind, Mira Baz would fain have avoided them and he turned back with this intention. However, one of the party caught sight of him as he moved away.

'Oh, Mira Baz, come here,' he shouted. 'We are discussing a matter of great importance and we want your advice.'

Reluctantly, Mira Baz, joined them and sat down.

‘Well, what’s the idea ?’ he said moodily.

‘Look here, Mira Baz, what has come over you ?’ some one asked. ‘You go about as if you had seen a ghost. Are you ill or——?’

‘Never mind about that,’ another interrupted. Let’s tell him what we are talking about. There is something about which we should like your opinion. So listen and let us know what you think.’

Apparently various rumours had recently found their way from Peshawar to the Bazar Valley. It was said that a large proportion of the British troops had been sent to Rawalpindi to quell riots there and that, during their absence, there had been grave disorder in Peshawar City, that serious trouble had broken out amongst the Indian regiments. It had also been reported that the Mahsuds had risen against the British in Waziristan and that there was unrest in the Kurram. Day after day the inhabitants of the Bazar Valley heard some fresh story, which only added weight to those previously received and indicated that the British Raj in India was on the wane.

‘Of course. this information may not be entirely true,’ a youth named Ayub remarked. ‘Some of these stories may be mere rumours, but they cannot all be lies.

‘Besides,’ another put in. ‘An old mullah visited our house yesterday—a very saintly man—and he said there was a great deal of truth in these rumours and, if we Afridis wanted to take our revenge on the British, now was the time to do it. In fact, he urged us to do

so and said it was our duty. Of course, my father merely shook his head and said he had heard that tale before. He's like that—my father. Always apt to be over-cautious.'

'Probably doesn't want to risk the few remaining years of his life,' some one laughingly added.

'Well,' Ayub went on, eagerness and excitement setting his tongue racing. 'We have been discussing the possibility of carrying out a raid on one of the outlying villages in the Peshawar Valley. It would be a splendid opportunity with most of the British troops away and all this trouble happening elsewhere. What could be easier than to go down to some village at night, loot the Hindu bunniahs there, even carry off a few for ransom, and get back to safety? Why, it would be child's play.'

'What about a raid on Pabbi railway station?' Said Gul, a red-cheeked giant of a fellow with humorous eyes, asked, looking round to see what the others thought of the idea. 'The station-master there is sure to have large sums of money in his possession and it should not be difficult to overpower the police guard and to capture their rifles.'

Ayub shook his head.

'No, I'm not in favour of attacking any place where there is known to be an armed guard,' he said. 'Let's go for the Hindu bunniahs, I say, and make them disgorge some of their ill-gotten gains. What do you think, Mira Baz?'

Mira Baz at first made no reply. The mention of rifle stealing had put an idea into his head. He was in need of money and he had to have it quickly. If he

could prove he was rich, there was some small chance of gaining Lal Mast's daughter, Ziarigula, but what earthly chance did he stand of making money if he stagnated in the Bazar Valley? None at all, and he would lose Ziarigula for ever. Modern rifles could be sold for at least six hundred rupees apiece in Tirah, some said for more. If he took part in a raid on Pabbi, he might collect a rifle or two and other valuables as well. Ziarigula was worth much risk, even that of his life. In imagination, he saw himself not only wealthy, but with Ziarigula as his wife. To him, who had believed himself shut out from the possibility of such happiness, a vista of inexpressible delight was unfolded. He could have shouted his gratitude for being given this opportunity. He felt that a great weight had been lifted from him. Eagerly he looked at Ayub. He had seldom felt more excited. 'I will join you gladly in a raid,' he exclaimed. 'I presume you want me? The time seems opportune and the risks small. In any case, life without adventure is a poor thing. Personally, I favour Said Gul's proposal of attacking Pabbi. I want to have a chance of getting a rifle, possibly two or even three, I—'

He checked himself abruptly, fearful of giving his secret away.

Ayub looked at him with puzzled good humour. 'You are a queer chap, Mira Baz,' he said. 'First you come along here with your face wearing an expression of complete melancholy and then, all of a sudden, you become the most eager and excited of the lot of us. Anyhow, I'm very glad you are with us over this affair.'

So there and then the raid was decided on. After much discussion and argument, Said Gul's proposal to attack Pabbi was ruled out owing to the possibility of the police guard having been strengthened and also the distance to be travelled on their return to safety. Eventually, the plan decided on was to surround a certain village where it was known some Hindu bunniahs of great wealth lived and plied their trade as money-lenders.

They would leave the next evening after sunset taking the road past Walai and thence to Chora. From Chora, they would leave the road and strike across the hills, crossing the Khyber Pass in the neighbourhood of Katta Kushta, but keeping the post there half a mile or so on their right to avoid the possibility of being seen. Food for two days only would be taken, as, once in the vale of Peshawar, food could be obtained without difficulty from any of the numerous villages dotted about the plains. They could reach the foot-hills bordering the Peshawar Plain before dawn. There they would lie up for the day and carry out the raid the following night. If all went well, they should be back safely in Bazar on the third or, at latest, the fourth night.

To his parents Mira Baz said not a word that evening regarding the prospective raid. They were old and he was an only son, so he could hardly expect a ready acquiescence on their part to the venture. He had made up his mind definitely and the prospect excited and pleased him. His spirits revived and he laughed and joked at the evening meal in a way that he had not done for a long time past. His parents showed their delight in finding he had returned to his natural liveliness.

'You are in great form to-night, my boy,' his old father remarked, noticing the change and looking searchingly at him. 'Haven't seen you like this for ages, and it fills me with much joy. You look as if some great luck has come your way.'

But Mira Baz merely smiled and answered nothing and his father pressed him no further for his confidence.

They left Bazar when the twilight had faded into dusk.

By common consent, Ayub, although not the senior in age, was elected as leader of the party, mainly by virtue of his having taken part in a highly successful raid a few months before and also because he knew the country in which the raid was to take place and the route that led to it. He was a youth of forceful personality who possessed most of the qualities of leadership, and people listened to him.

They travelled light and at great, speed, for the distance to be covered during the hours of darkness was long. For the most part, they moved without talking, but sometimes the silence gave way to a remark in a low pitched, guttural tone or a ribald jest. The night was dark until the moon came majestically over the shoulder of a hill, spreading a radiance over the country-side.

As they neared Chora, the large white fortress of Yar Mahomed Khan, Malikdin Khel Afridi, was to be seen, standing in solitary glory and looking huge and ghostly in the moonlight. To Mira Baz it gave the impression of being alive and rather sinister, as though it presaged some evil; a curious sense of foreboding came over him. In the sparkle of impulse, he had forgotten his parents, and they had dropped into the

past, but now, in imagination, he saw them. The realization that, after his parents, he was the last of his line in the family was suddenly brought home to him. If anything was to happen to him, his parents would be alone and defenceless. Was he now saying farewell to his parents, to his comparatively carefree life in the Bazar Valley? He allowed the thought to dwell for a while; turning it over and over in his mind, and then thrust it wildly aside. I am going to succeed, I must, he thought. Anyhow, there was no turning back now. He must follow this adventure to its end. In silence, he prayed for success.

So far the road had presented no difficulties. Now they struck left over the hills, following a track which led towards the Khyber Pass. As they approached British territory, they moved more warily with two men acting as scouts to give warning of anything untoward in front. From time to time the sound of movement could be heard and they halted, flattening themselves close to the ground until the danger had passed. On and on they travelled tirelessly until the first pale light of dawn found them in the foot-hills bordering the Peshawar Plain. So far, luck had been with them, for they had run into none who could give word of their approach.

Ayub now selected a spot close to a spring which offered a good hiding-place where they could lie up during the hours of daylight when it would be dangerous to be out and about. Having eaten some of their food and drunk of the cold spring water, they lay down and rested for the remainder of the day, taking it in turns to do sentry duty. Although Mira Baz realized

the necessity for this interval, he longed and fretted for action.

So far as they knew, their movements during the night had not been observed by a soul and, unless some British Government official or spy had got wind of their departure from the Bazar Valley, there should be no difficulty in carrying out the raid successfully, collecting the Hindu bunniahs' hoard and getting back across the border before the hue and cry had brought troops or police to the spot.

As darkness descended, they were astir once more. Ayub, knowing the lie of the country, decided that it would be wise if he moved a hundred yards or so ahead of the party and he selected Mira Baz to accompany him. At first their way lay across a plain and through a tangle of scrub. Ayub, with the unerring instinct of the Pathan for direction, did not hesitate on the road to his goal. The far side of the plain they came to another small range of foot-hills. Following a rough track up a hill, Ayub halted near the top and lay down, sending Mira Baz back to tell the others to join him.

Speaking to them in a whisper, he outlined his plan.

'We shall follow the line of this nullah just in front of us,' he said with decision. 'The village is about half a mile beyond the exit of the nullah. If you look carefully, you can just see the houses silhouetted against the background of the sky. When we emerge from the nullah, the gang will be divided into three.'

He then detailed the three parties.

* Dry bed of river

'My party,' he went on, 'will make for the centre of the village, capture any one we see on the way, find out the whereabouts of the Hindu bunniahs, overpower and loot them. You, Said Gul, will make for the left of the village and work towards the centre doing likewise. You, Gul Zaman, with the remaining six will be in reserve outside the village and about two hundred yards this side of it to help us in our escape, if necessary. Now, do you all understand? I'll repeat it once more.'

A few moments pause.

'Right,' said Ayub, in a hoarse whisper. 'Off we go and Allah be with us.'

Silence fell over them again.

With infinite caution they started off down the winding nullah, moving stealthily like wild animals after their prey and with every sense alert under the stress of excitement. In the nullah bed it was hot and still. A pariah dog outside the village for which they were making barked, the staccato notes cutting through the night air.

Otherwise, there was so great a quietness that Mira Baz found it hard to realize that the climax of the venture was at hand.

Then, suddenly, without the smallest warning, a shot rang out from the right and then another and another until the air seemed filled with bullets, which sang and shrieked through the darkness, hitting the earth up all round them. An occasional one ricocheted off a stone and whined away into the distance. More than one took effect, for two men were writhing on the ground close to Mira Baz and a third lay lifeless.

Ayub was quick to realize that the raid had failed, that troops or police were on the spot and, declining to await further developments, he dashed back calling on the others to follow him.

Mira Baz was about to run back when a violent blow on his chest, as though he had been struck by a hammer, threw him to the ground. Breathless, he attempted to rise, but fell to the ground again. He felt little pain after the first impact, but a peculiar numbness was creeping over him. He put his hand to his chest and brought it away stained with red. He dragged himself along the ground for a short distance, but his strength failed him and he lay still, his body rigid, with his breath coming in great sobbing gasps. He tried desperately to piece together his thoughts, but they seemed to jostle one another in his brain so that there was utter confusion. How silent it was now. Although he knew that day should be creeping into the sky, it appeared to be getting darker and darker. As in a dream, he saw a man with a red face bending over him and this man spoke some words, but they were quite unintelligible. He tried to raise his voice in defiance, but no words would come. He had no power to resist further. As he lay there, he felt infinitely weary and nothing seemed to matter very much except that he desired rest and peace above everything. Then his body slackened and fell loose.

Chapter II

A RAID FORESTALLED

THAT same night John Matheson was lying out in the open. Thousands of stars twinkled merrily overhead, as if they were laughing at the absurdity of the situation, and a great round moon stared at him with a cynical look on its smug face. The night was stiflingly hot and through the languorous air flew innumerable insects, large and small, making buzzing noises after the manner of their kind.

Reliable information had been received at Brigade Headquarters that a party of Afridis was on its way down from the pleasant uplands of Tirah with the avowed intention of carrying out a raid on some village in the vale of Peshawar. On receipt of this information, several detachments had been sent out to various points to waylay the raiders.

It was June and the hot weather had been taking its usual dreary course. One blazing day succeeded another with monotonous regularity, and night followed muggy, breathless night. There were no changes in the weather during those days except a slight though perceptible increase in heat. Mosquitoes and sand flies were making their unpleasant selves felt on the going down of the sun, and the hospital returns showed that

fever had begun to take toll of the garrison, Peshawar was not a pleasant place at that time of the year.

It had been a year of unrest on the North-West Frontier. There had been many raids by the trans-border tribesmen into British territory and they had become more frequent. There appeared to be no particular reason to account for them, except that certain mullahs had been preaching a gospel of hatred for the British and they had been helped by a few men of previous standing among the border towns who had been outlawed for offences against the Government and whose lives were forfeit.

The tribesmen of the trans-frontier hills, credulous, ignorant and inflammable, inhabitants of a poor land and ordinarily holding themselves aloof from the civilized world, are ever on the watch for an opportunity to swoop down on their weaker brethren in the plains. It was a matter of no great difficulty to persuade these impetuous people, who almost enjoy a fight for its own sake and are born gamblers, that a heaven-sent opportunity had arrived to set forth on a marauding expedition.

Thus it came about that John Matheson found himself lying out in the open under the stars on that hot weather night with his company, mostly stalwart Awans from the Salt Range, disposed in the way which his fertile mind considered was the most suitable to deal destruction to any party of tribesmen who might have the temerity to approach from the direction of the hills.

The position he had taken up was on a knoll commanding the entrance to a boulder-strewn nullah, which wound its way upwards between hills, low and

stony at first, but getting higher and higher until the nullah itself petered out before reaching a narrow pass. The nullah offered an excellent covered approach for raiders and a convenient bolt-hole for their return to safety. Behind the knoll stretched the open plain, and in the distance the lights of Peshawar cantonment and the large city could be seen winking gaily.

Having taken up his position, Matheson had issued strict orders to his men that there was to be no movement nor the least noise, knowing full well that the quick-witted and keen-eyed tribesmen can see like cats in the dark, and that any real chance of success against a raiding gang, which might venture down the nullah in front of them, would be entirely thrown away by the slightest noise. A proportion of the company was held in reserve whilst the remainder, spread across the knoll, were lying so that each man could touch his neighbour. If any man believed he saw or heard movement in front of him, he was to touch the man next to him, who would do likewise to the person beyond, and so on down the line. This arrangement ensured that all would be alert in case of alarm.

So there they had been lying for the past six hours, waiting, watching and listening with nerves as taut as fiddle-strings for some movement down the nullah. Earlier on in the night they had heard voices from the small hamlets dotted about the plain behind them, the occasional beat of a 'dhol', and the high-toned, melancholy notes of a flute, but these noises gradually died down as the villagers betook themselves off to bed and there was silence. Every now and then the calm of the night was broken by the ghoulish cry of a jackal, that cry of utter and overwhelming despair, and for a few

minutes the air was rent by answering howls from other jackals in the neighbourhood, until the infernal din died down as suddenly as it began. Otherwise, the silence was unbroken except for the occasional squawk of some lonely night-bird.

The silhouette of the hills stood out sharply against the night sky, but the mouth of the nullah was shrouded in gloom. At times, Matheson, his ears straining to catch the faintest sound, his eyes peering incessantly into the shadows, with a hundred thoughts chasing each other through his brain, could not prevent his imagination from playing tricks, so that the large boulders in the nullah ahead and the scrub on the hill-side took on the shape of living beings in the half-light of the moon. The fantastic quietness of the scene got on his nerves. It gave him a curious sense of isolation.

Sometimes, through the long hours of waiting, a great weariness assailed him and he found much difficulty in keeping his eyes open. He had to pinch himself to keep awake.

Suddenly he felt a sharp tug at his arm.

‘Look ahead, sahib,’ Havildar Feroze Khan, who was lying beside him, whispered. ‘Some one moves on the right-hand side of the nullah. Do you see?’

‘Which side?’

‘The right-hand, sahib—about two hundred yards away, I should think. I cannot see anything now, but I swear I saw something move there a minute ago.’

Matheson, staring into the darkness, could see nothing at first. Then he believed he could make out a dark form creeping noiselessly under the lee of a small hill

to his right front. It was possible that his imagination was running riot, so he closed his eyes for a few seconds and then looked once more into the nullah ahead of him, but could see no movement whatsoever and he lay there listening to silence. The tension evoked in him a sensation of wanting to cry out and it required an immense effort of will to keep silent.

‘There is another one farther up, sahib—coming the same way.’

Now he did see something, but what ?

Then, out of the silence, came the unmistakable sound of a ‘chapli’* or boot scraping against a stone; another figure, moving stealthily, showed up for a moment and was lost to view behind a bush.

‘Warn the men to be ready,’ he whispered to Feroze Khan and to the man on his left.

Now there seemed to be no doubt at all. Any people coming down the nullah in the early hours of the morning were there for no good purpose. The moment had arrived and the shadow of death hovered over some of those men in the nullah.

Matheson waited a minute or two to make quite certain that all his men were prepared and in order to allow more tribesmen to collect. As he waited, other shadowy forms became visible, moving forward in the nullah about a hundred and fifty yards ahead, but, except for the occasional sound of the dislodgment of a stone, the quietness was almost uncanny.

He could see that the men nearest to him had their rifles to the shoulder and he hoped that all were ready.

* Pathan shoe.

An excitement that was intense pervaded his being. He passed his hand over his forehead and his fingers were wet and slippery with sweat. He swallowed and his tongue ran over his lips to relieve their dryness, and his heart seemed to miss a beat or two before he gave the order to fire. And then the silence was splintered with the noise of bullets, which sang and shrieked through the darkness. Intensified by the previous silence, the noise was deafening, and, above this din, rose the shouts and groans of men in the nullah, who had been taken completely by surprise.

Matheson had not put up a Verrey light before giving the order to fire for fear of disclosing his position to the raiders, but now one sailed into the air and an unforgettable sight met his eyes. About twenty men could be seen dashing wildly up the nullah, some wounded men were rolling about on the ground, while a few lay stretched out, apparently lifeless.

He shouted out an order to continue firing on the men retiring up the nullah and they were kept in view with the aid of Verrey lights. Then he ordered the 'Cease fire'.

Although it was still too dark to see clearly, dawn was at hand and a faint glow broke up the curtain of the night, so Matheson waited a while before he took any further action. Then, when things in front had taken shape and he could distinguish bushes and figures in the nullah, he ordered an advance to see what damage had been done to the raiding gang.

Three men lay stretched out on the ground in the attitude of death while about double that number appeared to be wounded. He went up to one whom

he had seen dragging himself along the ground although he lay still now.

He bent down towards Mira Baz, who, lying helpless, looked up at him with eyes in which distrust, supplication, horror and surrender were inextricably mingled. As he looked at the young tribesman, John Matheson was conscious of no particular hatred for him nor did the sight provoke in him any sort of revulsion. All he felt was a great pity, so that he turned his head away.

'Bring some stretchers,' he ordered Havildar Feroze Khan who stood beside him. 'We must get the wounded to hospital as soon as possible. This poor chap is badly wounded in the chest, but the doctors may be able to do something for him.'

'Very good, sahib.'

After that long period of waiting and excitement an inevitable reaction had set in and it made Matheson feel infinitely weary and rather depressed. He felt dishevelled and colourless in the dead hour of early dawn. He could only think of the folly, the futility of the preceding action. All the glory seemed to have faded away.

He turned again to Mira Baz.

'Don't worry,' he said in Pushtu in a kindly voice. Somehow, the sight of the young tribesman, lying there helpless and maimed, gave him a strange feeling of regret rather than of triumph or resentment. 'We'll get you to hospital soon and they'll put you right there'.

But Mira Baz was too far gone to answer or to understand, even if it had been possible. A spasm of

pain made his mouth twitch. His eyes had a wandering look about them and they showed no gleam of intelligence.

As the detachment with its prisoners marched back later to Peshawar the sun blazed in an unclouded and windless sky. Two Pathan boys, driving a herd of cattle to pasture, stood on one side as they marched by and looked at them with interest and some amusement; they passed a bullock cart laden with vegetables on its way to the cantonment market; outside a village some women gossiped beside a well and a yellow pariah dog, suffering from mange, stopped scratching itself to bark shrilly at them and then bolted back along an alleyway in the village with its tail between its legs.

Another day of the Indian hot weather had begun.

Chapter III

A HOLIDAY IN KASHMIR

THE sun was slowly going down and its golden rays found an answering gleam in the crystal-clear water of the Dal lake at Srinagar. The mountains of Kashmir, now a glorious purple in the fading light, stood outlined against a pale orange sky, their wild beauty forming a most effective background to the soft serenity of the lake, where the surface of the water lay placid and unruffled by a breath of wind. In the distance a white mist hung listless in the still air, and a sweet evening coolness drifted over the lake. Dragonflies, their wings scintillating in the evening sun, darted to and fro, settling on a reed for a moment only to leave it for another an instant later, with no apparent reason, as though they felt the urgent necessity for sharp movement before darkness ordered them to rest and sleep. Over all was a magnificent calmness and a complete sense of peace.

John Matheson lay back in his 'shikāra'* and sighed in utter contentment. He was on two months' leave from Peshawar, and the prospect brought a great peace of mind. Those Frontier hills seemed thousands of miles away, and the hot weather and its attendant discomforts

* Kashmir punt.

merely an unpleasant dream. It was difficult to reconcile them with the present.

A girl was by his side. Her fair hair framed a beautiful face, and there was a light in her soft, blue eyes and a smile about her mouth as she looked up at him.

'Well,' she murmured lazily. 'I don't know what you think about it, Johnnie, but I call this pretty good.'

'Good? It's simply marvellous, darling. It's almost impossible to realize I was in Peshawar a fortnight ago. It seems more like a hundred years ago and that I'm now living in a different world. The heat down there was infernal, Anne, even worse, I think, than last summer. I'll never forget that night about a month ago when we sat out for that gang of raiders. Every mosquito and biting insect in the world seemed to have collected in that one spot to torment us, as though they knew that we were forced to keep still and couldn't wave our hands about and kill them.'

'You've never told me much about that night, Johnnie. It was very successful, wasn't it? Do tell me.'

'Oh, there's nothing much to say about it. It was the usual sort of show. As you know, there's been a series of alarms and excursions round Peshawar and, in fact, all along the Frontier the past few months. Often, the information about the raiders coming is completely false and they don't turn up at all, or they come by an unexpected route, do what they want, and get away before troops can reach the spot. This interception of raiding gangs is not as easy as it sounds, and it's like looking for a needle in a haystack. Nine times out of ten you don't get a glimpse of a raider,

you have a damnably uncomfortable time, and feel completely demoralized. But this time luck was on our side. We were in the right spot and we let them have it good and proper. That's all.'

'But tell me more about it.'

'There's not an awful lot to tell. I'd been ordered where to take B Company. We left the lines at nine o'clock that night and had an incredibly foul march of about three hours. The heat was simply terrific. I knew the ground fairly well as it was close to where we did battalion training last winter, so we took up a position facing a nullah which comes down from the hills—a sort of small valley—and lay there under the blinking stars for hours and hours. And then they came. I must say,' he added, 'it was jolly exciting while it lasted and almost repaid us for the number of times we've sweated out and seen nothing.'

'But did you have to kill many of them, Johnnie?' she asked anxiously.

'Oh, my God, what questions you do ask.'

'Don't be blasphemous—but did you?'

'Only two or three, but we wounded quite a number. I remember there was one chap, quite young—he couldn't have been more than about seventeen or eighteen years old. He got a really nasty one in the chest and I thought he was a goner, but he's recovering—or was when I left Peshawar. I went once or twice to see him in hospital and Hankinson—that doctor, you remember, we met at the Furze's party last winter—told me he was making a miraculous recovery. Wonderful constitutions these tribesmen have. I used to air my bad Pushtu

on him. I don't know how much he understood, but he used to smile intelligently. I got to like him a lot. Such a pleasant face he'd got, and a magnificent body. He said his name was Mira Baz or something like that. I advised him to give up this raiding business and join the army as a recruit when they've let him out of jail or whatever they do with him. I believe they are enlisting trans-border Afridis in some battalions now. He's just the right type.'

For a moment she lowered her head, then she looked up again with eyes which shone brightly.

'Anyhow,' she said gently. 'I'm thankful that's all over for the present, Johnnie—so thankful—and I've got you with me. For me, that's all that matters.'

He laid his hand on hers.

'Same here, my darling,' he agreed. 'Four whole weeks now, and then it will only be about a month before you join me at Peshawar. Why, it's a grand prospect. I hate these separations more than I can say. Let's hope,' he added, 'that we'll be left in peace this winter.'

They remained silent for a while, and then, with a sudden movement, he drew her towards him and her arm went about his neck. 'I'm so happy, Anne, my sweet,' he whispered.

'Oh, God, let this go on for ever,' she thought. 'I'm so happy too. Please, God, let it be the same always.'

Aloud she said:

'I refuse to look into the future, Johnnie darling. It's too far off. Let's enjoy the present and be grateful.'

They had been married at Peshawar only eight months before. Their wedding had been the usual festive affair with the church packed to overflowing, and every one, from the Governor downwards, had been more than kind to them. The winter had been a kaleidoscope of happy memories—a season of gaiety, a little superficial, perhaps, but with every variety of entertainment and sport which can be found in a large Indian cantonment. Of their marriage, they had expected a new heaven and a new earth, and they had not been disappointed. Anne had seen India at its very best.

Except for the tribal scare, political unrest and trouble on the Frontier had passed them unnoticed, so that they were able to look back on a winter of unalloyed happiness.

The hot weather had come early that year, so that by the end of March, the women had started packing for the move to the hills for the summer. Anne had been one of the last to go, and it was well into April before she arrived in Kashmir.

‘I hate your having to do these hot weathers year after year, Johnnie,’ she said. ‘You were looking so tired and strained when you arrived up here and you’re looking a different person now.’

‘I’m afraid they can’t be avoided, unless I pass into the Staff College next year, and get a staff job which will take me to Simla or some hill station. But what a hope! Anyhow, let’s do what you say, and live in the present and let the future look after itself.’

The rhythmic swish of oars could be heard close by and from one of the canals leading from the Dal

lake, another shikara came into view round a bend, moving towards them.

‘Hullo, there’s Jimmy Jameson,’ John remarked. ‘Some one told me yesterday that he’d arrived here on leave from Kohat.’

They saw him before he saw them—a small, tubby man, growing bald, with a round, genial face.

‘Hullo, Jimmy,’ shouted John. ‘I heard you’d got up a few days ago.’

The two shikaras were brought alongside each other.

‘Well, well, fancy seeing you here, John,’ Jameson remarked, ‘and Anne too, looking as pretty as ever, bless her. I’m terribly glad to see you both, though I’d have thought you couldn’t have torn yourself away from Peshawar, John—lovely climate, raids, riots, and all sorts of excitements. What was it like down there when you left?’

‘Absolutely foul. The worst spot on earth.’

‘Kohat’s almost as bad just now. I got away just in time, as, two days after I left, a column was sent out to round up some blighters who have been giving a lot of trouble lately—sniping convoys, kidnapping Hindus and creating havoc generally. I hear you’ve had a spot of bother your way and expect more.’

Anne’s face fell. His words made her uneasy, and a thrill of apprehension came over her.

‘Expect more! What do you mean?’ she asked, stretching out and setting a slim hand on his arm. ‘You haven’t heard anything about more trouble near Peshawar? I couldn’t bear it if John was recalled.’

'Of course not, Anne. That was only my little bit of fun. Besides, even if there was any trouble, they wouldn't want a useless officer like John down there to muck up things.'

'A silly remark, I call that.'

'Well, there's a limit to human endurance, old boy,' John replied, 'It would be too bad if they sent for me after all I've been through.'

'No, you just forget about it and enjoy yourselves. How long are you staying in Srinagar?'

'We go up to Gulmarg to-morrow. We've got rooms at Nedou's hotel for a month.'

'Grand. I'm going up there on Wednesday and have taken a room at Miss O'Connor's—just across the road. We must play a round of golf, John, some day next week. Well, children, I must push along as I'm going to an evening party at Nagim---bathing, lovely girls and all that. Cheerio. See you in Gulmarg. "Chello",* boatman.' And with a wave of his hand he moved off.

'Nice chap, Jimmy, isn't he?'

'Yes,' Anne agreed. 'I like him awfully. Johnnie, you don't think there's anything in what he said about more trouble round Peshawar?'

'Of course not. He was only trying to be funny—a bit crude, I call it—don't you worry your dear little head about it. We'll get our month in Gulmarg together, and won't it be grand.'

For a while they remained silent. The shikara gently cut its way through the placid water, and the magic of sunset was about them.

* Go on,

‘What are you thinking about Anne? You look so serious.’

‘Dreams, Johnnie, just dreams. Listen.’

Across the water came the sound of people singing in unison, and in the distance could be seen a large boat with a matted roof, packed with Kashmiri men, women and children to its utmost capacity. It was coming towards them from Srinagar, on its way to one of the outlying villages the other side of the lake, and, as it moved slowly through the water, a man sang a verse, the refrain being taken up by all the others, the solo singer then starting another verse or breaking into a new song.

‘Although I usually dislike and can’t understand Indian music,’ Anne said quietly, ‘I do love the sound of those Kashmiri boating songs as the villagers return home in the evening. It’s so gentle and satisfying and peaceful.’

‘Yes, it’s pleasant, hearing it come over the water like that, isn’t it? Sounds so romantic.’

Twilight is short in the East, so that the evening quickly faded into night. The slender sickle of the new moon showed low down in the sky, as they made their way through the water. The boatman now lit a hurricane lamp, which he hung on the prow of the shikara.

They reached the Dal lake steps and paid off the boatman who, in a sudden fit of optimism, demanded more than double the authorized fare, and, on not receiving it, put on an expression of mingled surprise and sadness. Then they walked slowly back to the hotel and went straight to their rooms.

'Good. The post's in,' Anne said, taking some letters off the table in the sitting-room. 'Three for you, Johnnie. Here they are. I've heard from mother and Phyllis Henstock—the rest don't seem to be very interesting—bills, I think.'

'Hullo, who's this from with the Peshawar post-mark. I don't recognize the writing,' he remarked, tearing it open. 'Oh, it's from Hankinson, the doctor. I wonder what he has to say.'

They started reading their letters in silence.

'You remember, Anne'—John looked up from his letter—'I was telling you about that young Afridi—Mira Baz or some name like that—who was so badly wounded in the chest, but was recovering?'

'Yes, what's happened to him?'

'Hankinson says that he escaped from the hospital the other night and has completely disappeared. He says he had practically recovered. Every one in the hospital had got to like him so much, and they felt, rather sorry for him as he was bound to get a stiff punishment when he was discharged from hospital. Anyhow, he's gone, and has not been seen or heard of since, although the police have searched high and low. Probably got across the border by now, and more power to him, I say. I liked that lad. Hankinson says he thought I'd be interested to know about it.'

'Well, I hope he's the other side of the border, and not trying to do any more mischief round Peshawar.—Mother says in her letter that she's thinking of paying us a visit this winter. She says she can get a cheap two months' return ticket by P. & O. which would give her about a month with us. She wants to know what we

think of the idea. If she does come, she'll arrive just before Christmas.'

John made no answer at once.

'If you'd said your sister or your aunt or one of your girl friends had asked to come,' he replied at last, 'I'd have said "damn", as I was so looking forward to having you to myself this winter, Anne, but as it's your mother, who's a complete charmer and is partly responsible for you being born and has always been so good to us, I give my entire approval. Write and say we'd be delighted.'

'Thanks awfully, darling. I know she'd like it, and she'll be very easy about the house.'

'I say, Anne what about dressing for dinner now, and going on to the cinema afterwards? I believe it's a jolly good film with that girl, Jane something or other, with the lovely voice and legs, in it. What about it?'

'Yes, let's,' she replied, getting up. 'You and your girls, Johnnie!'

He put his hands on her shoulders and kissed her on the lips.

'There's only one girl in the world for me, my sweet, and you know it as well as I do.'

'Please always go on thinking that, Johnnie,' she replied gently.

Chapter IV

MIRA BAZ IN HOSPITAL

MIRA BAZ had found life in the hospital at Peshawar not only irksome and boring, but intolerable. To his intense disappointment at the failure of the raid, the discomfort of his wound, and the dashing of his high hopes was added the fear of the punishment that undoubtedly awaited him, so that he felt he might go mad. At Peshawar he was a stranger in strange land. Even the British officer who had been responsible for his wound but whom he had come to regard as his friend, appeared to have deserted him, as he no longer visited him in hospital. The Englishman's faulty, uneasy Pushtu had greatly amused Mira Baz, and his face had appealed to him by virtue of the honesty and humour to be seen there, so that he had looked forward to the visits and missed them when they ceased.

When he was first brought to hospital, the wound in his chest was so serious that he lay on his bed in a state of partial coma. But, as the wound began to heal gradually and he was on the road to recovery, he started to think clearly, and the more he thought, the more did he realize the necessity for escape.

It would not be simple, he realized that. The place was closely guarded. There was a guard stationed out-

side the ward and an armed sentry inside the ward itself. All the time he lay on his bed, the word 'escape' was seldom absent from his thoughts. In his mind he devised various schemes, but none seemed to offer any distinct hope of success. Flaws were apparent in all of them. It was surely madness to imagine he could get away.

Then, quite unexpectedly, one night a heaven-sent opportunity was given him. A dust-storm got up, slight at first, but increasing in intensity until the noise outside was deafening. The ward was fitted with wire-netting doors, and as the howling wind lashed against the wire-netting, dust penetrated the gauze and filled the room. Suddenly there was a loud noise outside, as though something heavy had been blown down by the wind. Hearing this, the sentry opened a door to discover what had happened, and, as he did so, great clouds of dust poured into the ward. In an instant the room was so filled with dust that it was difficult to see clearly.

This was the signal for Mira Baz. Like a flash of lightning, he was off his bed and by the door. He drove his hand into the sentry's face and sent him sprawling. And then he ran for his life, and as he ran he was swallowed up in the darkness and the dust. He could see nothing, but that did not deter him. All he wanted, all he strove for, was to put a distance between himself and the hospital before he was missed, and before steps were taken to pursue and recapture him. Once, he ran straight into a wall and was thrown back breathless to the ground. He put his foot in a hole and fell full length, but was running again an instant later. Every now and then he bumped into people who were

hurrying along with closed eyes in the face of the storm. Still he ran at a loping trot on and on.

Although it seemed to him hours since he escaped from the hospital, it was impossible for him to hazard a guess at the time. He was unaware if it was still night or whether day had arrived. The dust obliterated vision and had the same effect as the darkness of night. Gradually the storm died down. The wind dropped and the dust, instead of being propelled madly through the air, began to settle on the ground.

Mira Baz could now distinguish objects, and he realized that night was past and that it was dawn. He could run no farther. Breathless and exhausted, he lay down on the ground, face downwards. For a time he could think of nothing except that he was tired, so tired that he wanted only to lie there and sleep. However, he resisted this impulse to sleep, and forced himself to take stock of his position. Three things were brought at once to his mind. Firstly, he was still in hospital uniform, and it was imperative that he should procure other clothing at the earliest opportunity, so that he could discard what was, in his opinion, not only a symbol of servitude, but was conspicuous. Then the wound in his chest, which had practically healed, was hurting and causing him some discomfort, but he put this down to the violent strain of running, and, as the pain was not unbearable, he did not feel unduly worried. Lastly he felt hungry. I wonder, he thought, if they have missed me and started in pursuit.

He sat up and looked about him. He found he had left Peshawar about two miles behind him and that he was in the open country with a small village close by.

In the distance he could see a large fort, and, beyond, the hills stood clear and sharp. Tired as he was in body and mind, those hills appeared to be beckoning to him. For him they stood for safety. An old man came out of the village and started to work in a field near by.

Mira Baz rose to his feet and walked towards him.

'Sterre mashe,'* he said in Pushtu.

'Kwar mashe,'§ the old man replied.

Mira Baz stood silent. He hesitated to enter into conversation, as he was fearful of giving his secret away.

'You look tired, my boy,' the old Pathan remarked. 'Come to my house and lie down for a while in the shade. The days now are overhot, and you appear to have come a long journey.'

He led him to the village and through a low doorway into his house. At first, Mira Baz could see nothing owing to the darkness after the glare outside and the smoke in the room, but soon his eyes became accustomed to the gloom and he perceived an old woman sitting in a corner, making 'chupatties' at a fire. The very sight was enough to make his mouth water.

'Lie on that bed,' the old man commanded. 'Soon food will be ready. I expect you are in need of some.'

Uttering a word of thanks, Mira Baz lay down and closed his eyes. The strain of the past few hours had been immense, and now the inevitable reaction set in. He felt completely worn out—his body went slack and his brain refused to function. As he lay there, he thought of nothing. If any one, no matter who it was, came to arrest him, he knew that he would give himself

* May you never be tired.

§ May you never be poor.

up without a semblance of a struggle. There was no more kick left in him.

He opened his eyes later to find the old man standing over him. For a moment he thought that here was some one who had arrived to recapture him, but he had no power to resist. When he realized who it was and that the old man was offering him food, his lips parted in a smile, and he had the sensation of a convicted prisoner who had just had a reprieve.

The food was good and put fresh life into him. Very soon he felt a different person and able to take up again the threads of life.

‘What is that large, grey fort one can see in the distance?’ he asked casually, during the meal.

‘That,’ the old man said in reply, ‘is Jamrud, a very strong fort. Some troops are quartered there. It is at the entrance to the Khyber Pass. But surely you must know that as you speak and look to me like an Afridi and the Afridis live in the hilly country alongside the pass.’

‘Yes, I am an Afridi,’ Mira Baz admitted. ‘But I have never before come to Peshawar by this way. The road through the Mohmand country to Shabkadar is shorter from my home.’

After they had finished their meal and washed their hands, the old man suggested that Mira Baz should remain indoors and rest.

‘If it is necessary that you should continue your journey to-day,’ he said, ‘I would advise you to travel when the sun has gone down. The heat of the day is great. Meanwhile rest in my house, boy.’

Mira Baz thanked him profusely. 'I will accept your invitation gratefully. A journey in the cool of the evening is preferable to one in the heat of the summer sun.'

He had not yet touched upon the subject of a change of clothes. Even if the hospital uniform had not been noticeable, the very ineptness of it worried him. He was of the opinion that the sooner he asked the better, so, after some manoeuvring, he broached the question.

'So you want to throw away the clothes you are now wearing?' the old man asked, and as he did so his eyes rested searchingly on him.

Mira Baz felt terror gripping his heart. He knows I am a fugitive, he thought, of course he knows. It was a mistake. I should never have mentioned the clothes. 'I was ill and in a British hospital,' he replied, 'but I felt the urge to see my home again, so I ran away and left my own clothes behind.'

There was a pause, which seemed to Mira Baz to continue for hours.

'Well,' said the old man slowly, 'I think I can find you a shirt and a pair of pyjamas, grey in colour and made of "mazri"—they may be a bit small for you as I am now not the splendid fellow I once was—age diminishes a man both in body and in mind. But you are welcome to the clothes if you want them.'

Mira Baz rested all that day, and when the sun found cover behind the hills to the west, he prepared to depart.

'Never, in all the life that is before me, will I forget the kindness you have bestowed on me,' he said to the old man. 'Allah be with you.'

'Allah be with thee too, my friend.'

Mira Baz passed out of the house and on to the open road.

For a time he walked along the main Peshawar-Jamrud road. He was convinced that he was a less likely object for suspicion on the road than off it.

The clothes he was wearing were unnoticeable and he was unarmed, so that he felt no reason to believe that any one would consider he was other than a normal villager returning home. However, when he was within some two miles of Jamrud Fort, he left the road and struck left, moving across country to the hills.

It was now dark and he felt that it would be wise if he avoided meeting any one who could question him. One time he saw the figure of a man with some donkeys outlined against the sky upon a mound, so he made a wide detour. As he reached the foot-hills, he turned his head and looked back towards the glare that was Peshawar. This was the first time he really dared to think he would escape. The moon in its first quarter was now in the sky.

He climbed a track that led upwards through the hills, and when he halted at the top he could see below him the huge white fort of Yar Mahomed Khan, standing solitary, and he knew he was in the Afridi country and was within reach of Chora.

Now he called a halt and lay down in a depression in the ground. Although he was in his own country, it

was unwise to move alone by night. He lay there, half awake, half asleep, until the first pale light of dawn heralded the coming of another day. Then he arose and followed the track leading to the Bazar Valley.

He passed the small village of Walai at the entrance to the valley, and could now see the town of China nestling under the hills on the far side.

It seemed that years had passed since he had taken part in the raid. He felt like a traveller who had gone countless miles and had come at last to the end of his journey. But, at the same time, remorse came to him because of the failure of all his hopes. He dared not look into the future.

An hour later he was at the door of his house. His old father was nowhere to be seen, but he perceived his mother sitting in a corner of the courtyard preparing some food. He moved towards her.

Catching sight of him, she dropped what she had in her hands and, for a second, just stared at him in astonishment and alarm, as though she had seen a ghost. Then, realizing it was no ghost, but her own son, she jumped up and with a great cry embraced him.

'Your father is working in the fields,' she exclaimed excitedly, continuing to embrace him. 'I must call him at once. Oh, what news!'

'Mother,' said Mira Baz quietly. 'Before you go to call father, please give me news of Lal Mast's daughter, Ziarigula. I must know. Is she well? Please tell me quickly.'

'Oh, that girl!' she answered, and there was bitterness in her tone. 'She was married last month to a rich

man named Tor Gul, who owns much land and property some fifteen "kos" * away from here.'

And Mira Baz turned away, unable to trust himself to speak.

'Well, my son, I must go and call your father,' she said. 'He'll be overjoyed at your return. Allah be praised. Praise be to Allah.'

She hobbled off, and Mira Baz sat down and put his head between his hands.

* Miles

Chapter V

MIRA BAZ COMMITS A MURDER

MIRA BAZ lay motionless and concealed among some large boulders on the bare hill-side. In his hands was a rifle, a bandolier full of cartridges encircled his waist, and a dagger hung by his side from a girdle.

It was a day of early September. The sun, high in a cloudless sky, blazed down upon him with a pitiless heat, intensified by the radiation from the stones around him. Except for a few stunted bushes, covered in a thick grey dust, no vegetation of any kind was to be seen. High up in the sky above him a large eagle circled ceaselessly round and round, in what appeared to be a meaningless fashion. Surely, thought Mira Baz, he has come to the wrong place if he expects to find food here, for it seemed that, except for himself, here was an area completely devoid of life. The solitude was absolute. No spot could be more desolate. The very loneliness of the place, combined with the complete absence of sound, had the effect of making the atmosphere strangely hostile and sinister. He lay without movement in the brooding silence that surrounded him.

His eyes were fixed intently on the dusty track below him. He was waiting for Tor Gul, the husband of Ziarigula, whom he hoped and believed would be returning by that route that day. He had been reliably

informed that he would be doing so, and he had no reason to doubt the authenticity of the report.

He was confident that he would be able to recognize Tor Gul again, because he had seen him outside Lal Mast's house some months ago, and had made inquiries at the time as to who he was. It was probable that, on that occasion, he was making arrangements for his marriage, Mira Baz thought bitterly.

He had made it his present object in life to waylay Tor Gul—and alone. He had that day settled himself in his present position among the boulders on the hill-side some hours ago. He was not going to run the risk of being late, for never again might such an opportunity present itself. He lay there waiting and watching, and the expectation was so intense that it was painful.

When, on that morning of his return to his home, his mother had told him of Ziarigula's marriage to Tor Gul during his enforced absence in Peshawar, Mira Baz felt as if he had been struck suddenly over the heart. That morning should have been the happiest in his life, but his mother, quite unwittingly, had helped to make it the most sorrowful. His world had rocked beneath him, and, with his youthful aspirations and desires, he thought it meant the end of all happiness for him.

For some days he had sat and moped in his house, refusing to see any one, although his friends flocked to greet him and to hear the story of his adventures. He gave out to his parents and the others that his wound was still worrying him considerably and that was necessary for him to have a complete rest.

'In a few days I shall have recovered,' he had said. 'But the effect of the wound coupled with the strain of

escape has left me weak. There is 'nothing seriously wrong with me. All I require is rest and quiet.'

During those days of seclusion he turned things over in his mind. Life without Ziarigula appeared to him to be futile, but the possibility of suicide was not considered as it was definitely opposed to his religion. Then, quite suddenly, an idea came to him. It was impossible to understand why he had not thought of it before. While Tor Gul was in the world he was the husband of Ziarigula, but was it essential that Tor Gul should live? What if he died suddenly? The taking of life across the border is a matter of small account. If Tor Gul was to die it should be a simple matter for him to persuade Ziarigula to run away with him, as he was convinced she loved him. The tribal custom is that when a woman's husband dies, the widow becomes the property of the dead man's brother, but Mira Baz had heard that Tor Gul's brother was well known for his cruelty and misdeeds and had been expelled from his village some time ago on account of them, so there was all the more reason for Ziarigula to go away with him. Tor Gul should die and he, Mira Baz, would be responsible for his death.

The next day he told his parents that he was going to some far-off village where he knew of a wise 'hakim'* who might help towards his complete recovery. He shrank from telling them the true reason of his departure.

'I will return shortly,' he said, embracing them. 'I hope that by then I shall have entirely regained my health.'

*Indian doctor.

He travelled towards Tor Gul's village, and spent a few days in a neighbouring village, spying out the land and quietly finding out about the movements of Tor Gul himself.

Mira Baz lay motionless behind the boulders, intently watching the track below.

'I've got to kill Tor Gul,' he repeated to himself. 'It is necessary both for my happiness and that of Ziarigula.'

Suddenly he saw the figure of a man come into view round a bend in the track. At the sight, his body stiffened and his heart seemed to miss a beat. From this distance the man looked to be Tor Gul, but he must let him come closer before he was quite sure. He must take no chances. Besides, it was necessary that he should fire at short range. It was important that there should be no possibility of a miss.

Nearer and nearer came the man, walking at a steady pace with the long, loose stride of the Pathan. Without turning his head, Mira Baz quietly slipped a cartridge into the chamber. No, there could be no mistake. It was Tor Gul.

Mira Baz, with his rifle to the shoulder, put up a silent prayer for the accuracy of his aim. Then he fired.

The shot broke sharply into the quietude and reverberated amongst the hills around. A sound like a hiccup escaped from the lips of Tor Gul, his knees gave under him, and his body sagged forward to fall twitching and kicking to the ground before it became quite still.

Mira Baz rose to his feet and hurried down the slope to the body. With no show of emotion, he gazed into the face of the dead man, whose eyes were already dull and glazed. Then he set off, bounding from rock to rock down the steep incline of the hill until he reached a valley up which he ran at a trot. The greater distance he could put between himself and Tor Gul's village the safer would he be. The sound of the firing must have travelled far, and it was more than probable that others would shortly be on the scene to find out the cause. He would return to claim Ziarigula at a later date, when the inevitable hue and cry had died down.

He spent the next three days in a cave which he had previously marked down. He had brought with him a meagre supply of food, which was sufficient for that time, so that, except to go occasionally to a spring near by to slake his thirst, there was no necessity to leave his hiding-place. At sunrise, on the fourth day, when he knew the mourning period was over and Ziarigula would be allowed to live a normal life, he considered it was safe to venture forth and claim her.

He had timed it so that he arrived in the morning near the village at the hour when it was the custom for the women to draw water from the spring outside. It was a typical Afridi village surrounded by a high mud wall and a watch-tower standing sentinel. A few green fields in the vicinity gave comfort to the eye, but otherwise the neighbourhood was bare and desolate as the surrounding country-side.

When he was within about half a mile of the place, he halted in a secluded spot in order to spy out the

land. He could see two or three women round the spring, but he could not recognize Ziarigula among them. Then from the gate of the village another woman emerged, and there was no doubt in his mind that this was her. He moved closer to make quite sure. There was no mistake—Ziarigula was now approaching the spring. She stopped to talk to the other women, who were returning to the village with 'chatties' full of water on their heads, and then she walked on. She was now alone at the spring. Mira Baz went forward and, as he passed by the spring, he coughed and she looked up and saw him.

Mira Baz advanced boldly towards her. It was certain that some one was in the watch-tower on the look-out for possible enemies approaching the village, so that the more natural his movements were, the less noticeable would he be. Anything furtive or designed to escape attention would be liable to suspicion. There could be no objection to his talking to her.

He approached her.

'Beloved,' he whispered, 'I must see you alone, but not here. There are too many people about.'

She made no reply, but merely looked up at him and smiled and then cast her eyes down.

'Tell me where I can meet you this evening,' he said. 'Tell me quickly. Some one leaves the village.'

Looking away from him, she named a meeting place and departed.

Mira Baz walked past the village and to the hills beyond, where again he lay up during the day. In the afternoon he moved to the appointed spot, and already she was there waiting for him.

She looked up at him with eyes full of joy.

'Why have you come. Mira Baz?' she whispered, knowing full well the answer.

'To take you away with me, beloved,' he replied. 'You are my life.' He went towards her, but as he did so she made a movement with her hand as if to ward him off.

Disregarding this movement, he rested his hands for a moment upon her shoulders and let them fall to her waist, and then he drew her slowly to him.

'Come away with me now, beloved,' he said gently. 'I cannot live without you.'

For a moment she remained silent. Then she looked up into his eyes.

'As my lord wills,' she replied slowly.

Thereupon they moved silently and swiftly over the hills in the direction of his home. Once or twice during their flight she stumbled and would have fallen if he had not caught her. The feeling of his strong arm caused an exquisite thrill of pleasure to pervade her.

It was not until they were within sight of his village that he called a halt.

On a hill overlooking the large village of China they stood facing one another in silence. Only now did the full meaning of his action come to Mira Baz. Up to this time his thoughts had been entirely centred on not only getting Ziarigula for himself, but persuading her to run away with him. All his efforts had been directed towards that end, and it had been achieved. Until now

he had not given a moment's consideration to the future.

Now fear presented itself to him—not physical fear, but a fear of what was to happen to their lives, a fear of the future. A complete realization came at last and a sudden pang seized him, for he knew that it would be quite impossible for them to remain in his village with his parents. Once it was found out that Ziarigula was with him and that they were living at China—and discovery was certain sooner or later—the relatives of Tor Gul would relax no effort to destroy not only both him and Ziarigula, but his parents as well.

For himself he felt no fear. He had taken the risk and must face the consequences. But he was filled with a great remorse that he had been the cause of putting his parents and Ziarigula into this position of danger.

At last he spoke.

'We have reached so far in safety,' he said slowly and quietly. 'Allah be praised. But danger is not past—in fact, a greater danger lies ahead of us. Let us see things as they are. We cannot remain in my village. Do you realize that, my Ziarigula? You see, Tor Gul's relatives will be after us very soon if they find out that you are with me in that village below there, of that I am sure. At present they have no knowledge that you have run away with me. They cannot possibly know this—nor must they ever know, or even suspect, for if they do my parents will suffer as well as ourselves, and we must not let that happen.'

So far she had listened to him without interruption.

'I had taken all that into account, Mira Baz,' she now said simply, 'before I went with you.'

'We can stay there to-night if we arrive after night-fall, but we must take all care that no one catches sight of us. It is imperative that I see my parents to make a full explanation and receive their blessing. But to-morrow—before daybreak—we must put a distance between us and China village—possibly for ever.'

Her eyes filled with tears, but she made no reply.

'Beloved, say you are not sorry,' he exclaimed, drawing closer to her.

'Sorry!' she answered firmly and without hesitation. 'I am happier now than I have ever been in my life. There is now hope in my heart where there was none before. I will not fail. I am your wife,' she added, and there was a note of defiance in the tones. 'I will follow you, Mira Baz, to the end of the world if need be.' She found herself in his arms for a moment, and then he released her.

'Come,' he said, taking her by the hand. 'We will go to a place I know of near by where no one is likely to find us, even if they searched. At nightfall we will go down to the village to say farewell to my parents. They will not like my going. How can they? But they will understand.'

After darkness had fallen they went down the hill to the village below. Only one or two lights showed up, indicating that nearly all the villagers had taken themselves off to bed.

There was an interval of waiting and knocking before the door was cautiously opened by his mother, fearful of who the visitor at this time of night might be.

'Why,' she exclaimed excitedly, 'here's our son come back again. Allah be praised.' And then catching sight of Ziarigula behind him, she stared at her with bewildered eyes.

'I will explain, mother,' Mira Baz said hastily. 'But not here. Let us go indoors.'

Chapter VI

THE ESCAPE

AT an early hour the following morning they crept from the house. His father had pressed a small bag containing some money into Mira Baz's hand before his departure, saying, 'You will need money, my son, until you can earn some.' They also took food to last them for two or three days. It was still dark and they moved silently and swiftly, for speed was essential, and any noise might draw to them the attention of some early riser, tribesmen being instinctively quick to sound.

By daybreak they had reached the top of the Bazar Pass. In the distance, far below them, the village of China, nestling under the foot-hills, was partly visible. Beyond stretched the full extent of the valley with a small stream wandering across it, looking like a narrow ribbon of grey silk. The village of Halwai could be seen perched on a hill to the north, and Walai situated in a bottle-neck at the far side. The tops of the hills encircling the valley were rose-tinted by the rising sun.

'Look back, beloved,' Mira Baz said. 'Pray that we may see it again one day, and that whatever the future may have in store for us we shall be together.'

Their plan was to cross into British India and to go to some cantonment, probably Nowshera, where Mira Baz might enlist in the army, or if that was not

possible, find work and earn money. Peshawar would be avoided, because of the possibility of recognition and recapture.

They dropped down the other side to the Khyber Pass, and making a detour so as to leave Landi Kotal on their left, they crossed the road and followed a track over the hills, entering the country of the Mohmands. Except for a short halt by a spring for food, they travelled all day, and late in the afternoon they had reached Hafiz Kor. Now they saw the huge mud fort of Shabkadar across the open plain in front of them, dominating the country-side, and farther to the right Michni Fort was visible.

Mira Baz stood looking across the plain with Ziarigula by his side.

‘Are you still glad?’ he asked gently.

‘It is needless to ask,’ she replied. ‘I shall always be glad.’

Although they were both weary, Mira Baz considered it wise to spend the night in British territory, if possible, rather than in the Mohmand country. No one would recognize him at Shabkadar, and law and order prevailed there in sharp contrast to the land across the Border. So footsore and completely worn out, they trudged across the stony plain for three miles.

That night they found lodging in the serai at Shankargarh, the large village situated alongside Shabkadar Fort.

The following day they remained at Shankargarh. They were both badly in need of a rest after the exertion of their flight, and, also, before definitely deciding

on a plan of action, Mira Baz wished to make inquiries regarding the prospects of employment, either in the army or elsewhere, and obtain advice as to the most likely place to obtain it.

For this purpose, leaving Ziarigula in the serai, he went into the town. Here the narrow streets were thronged with people, and the babel of voices raised a din which was almost deafening. Fat Hindu bunniahs, sitting cross-legged in their shops, bargained endlessly in high, shrill voices with would-be purchasers. Gesticulating with their podgy hands, they darted swift glances here and there with their bird-like eyes for other possible customers, every now and then wiping beads of sweat from their greasy faces with the backs of their hands. Sepoys from the detachment of Frontier Constabulary, quartered in Shabkadar Fort, swaggered carelessly down the street with the knowledge that they were the representatives here of law and order. A tonga* swayed and jolted slowly down the street. There was only just room for it to move, and the driver, cracking his whip and urging on his horse with curses, shouted to pedestrians to get out of his way. A sweetmeat seller sat shouting in a raucous voice to the passers-by of the delights of his confections. Beside him was a small primus stove, on which was perched a frying-pan containing 'jelabis,' twirling and sizzling in boiling 'ghi.'† Thousands of flies had settled on all the sweets in his shop. There were flies everywhere. Shopmen screamed across to others on the opposite side of the street. A group of broad-shouldered tribesmen stood chatting together, completely regardless of the fact that they were blocking the road for others,

*Pony trap. †Clarified butter.

and with a cheerful arrogance born of centuries of independence, occasionally burst into loud, guttural laughter at some joke made by one of them. In an alley just off the main street some old greybeards were talking earnestly together in low voices, wagging their heads and pulling at their beards, possibly bewailing the iniquities of modern life, or maybe concocting some nefarious scheme.

Getting into conversation with some Pathans, Mira Baz was told that, in order to enlist in the army he must go to Peshawar where there was a recruiting office, but from what he heard the outlook did not seem at all hopeful, and in any case Peshawar was the last place he intended to visit.

'They do not take Afridis from Tirah in the army now,' one man told him. 'I believe they only enlist them in the Frontier Constabulary, but you can find that out at Peshawar.'

'I did hear that some Tirah Afridis are being taken to drive army motor-cars,' another tribesman remarked, 'but I may be wrong.'

He asked if there was a chance of any employment at Nowshera.

'You could possibly get work as a coolie,' he was told. 'There is a big wood trade there and many men are employed. It is even possible that some sahib might employ you, and then the work would be easy and the pay good. But you are the best judge of what you can do.'

On his way back to the serai Mira Baz, thinking things over, decided to travel to Nowshera. He had been there with his father once before, when he was a

small boy, and well remembered the various places he had passed on the way.—Matta Fort, Abazai, Charsadda, Mardan, and then Nowshera. The memory of that journey still lived with him.

During his absence Ziarigula had not been idle. Taking a small tin mirror from a pocket in her shirt, she painted heavy streaks of 'kohl' round her eyes and rubbed it softly into the skin. Then she drew a metal comb several times through the long black tresses of her hair until it looked so sleek and clean that it shone. For I must look beautiful in the eyes of my lord, she smilingly said to herself. Looking at herself in the little mirror, she sighed happily, and a sudden fierce joy caught her.

Although they had a small room to themselves, several other men and women—travellers like themselves and all from across the border—were accommodated in the serai.

In the cool of the evening they sat chatting to the others in the courtyard of the serai. As they talked together, a young Pathan plucked at the strings of a zither, which he held in his lap, and sang quietly to them—songs of the hills and of love and of bravery. Then he broke into the 'Zakhmi Dil'*, the beautiful and saddest of all Indian songs and known throughout the length and breadth of the land. Ziarigula, leaning against Mira Baz and with his arm around her waist, felt happier than she had ever done in her life. She took no part in the conversation, but sat with closed eyes, and a smile trembled on her lips. The future stretched out before her, rosy with hope.

Early next morning they took the road for Nowshera.

* The wounded heart.

Chapter VII

MIRA BAZ FINDS EMPLOYMENT

THEY tramped along the metalled road, moving with a long, loose stride at a steady four to five miles an hour. He walked ahead of her, as was the custom. For the most part they walked in silence. Whenever Mira Baz wanted to say anything to her, he spoke over his shoulder. The sky was overcast. Heavy, sullen clouds hung low and motionless in a leaden sky with no gust of wind to set them moving. It was a dank, muggy day with thunder in the air.

A few hundred yards to the left of the road and situated at regular intervals was a line of what looked to them to be watch-towers. Curious as to what they were for, because they guarded no villages nor did they appear to serve any other useful purpose, Mira Baz inquired from a passer-by, and was told that they were blockhouses built by the British in 1916 to blockade the trans-border Mohmands, who had been carrying out raids and causing trouble generally at that time.

Passing Matta Fort, they crossed the river by ferry, and halted at Abazai under some trees for their morning meal. Soon heavy drops of rain pattered on the leaves above them, and a few minutes later the rain came down in torrents. The downpour lasted for about half an

hour, when it ceased as suddenly as it had begun. It cleared the air, which now felt sweet and clean.

That night they spent at Mardan, and at sunset the following evening they crossed the Kabul River by the bridge of boats and entered Nowshera. Ziarigula had never before seen any town of this size. The maze of streets, all thronged with people, the incessant noise, and the vastness of the city bewildered her, so that by the time they arrived at the serai, where they were to put up for the night, she felt depressed, weary, and completely out of her element.

Next morning Mira Baz set out to find employment. His small stock of money was practically exhausted, so it was essential that he should start to earn some at once. When he got down to plain facts, he realized the difficulties of getting any employment other than of a coolie. Enlistment in the army appeared to be out of the question. Even if trans-border Afridis from Tirah were being taken for the army, he would have to go to the recruiting office at Peshawar and he hesitated to return there so soon after his escape, for fear of recognition. His lack of knowledge of any trade, his ignorance of any language but Pushtu, and the necessity for earning money quickly limited his choice of employment.

The idea of working as a coolie was not only unattractive, but almost intolerable. He, Mira Baz, trans-border Afridi of the Zakka Khel clan, to be a coolie and forced to work under some fat Hindu contractor! The very thought filled him with a distaste which amounted to horror. But what was he to do? There seemed no other way out.

As he strode through the crowded streets on the way to the wood market, he weighed carefully the pros and cons of the situation. He was so lost in thought that every now and then he bumped into some passer-by, who was prepared to be abusive but, on seeing the large stature of the offender, considered it more politic to say nothing. Coming from a country where might is believed to be right, and the taking of something by force from another person is, in no sense of the word, wicked, he knew he might find ample opportunity to steal, but he did not dare run the risk of being caught by the police, and he had now no home across the border to which he could escape.

He left the town behind him and found himself quite close to the bank of the river. A few hundred yards down stream, he noticed a wood dump, round which many men were busily employed stacking wood. This decided him. Sitting at a table, writing in a book, was an Indian. He had a small body, bulging eyes, and a protruding stomach, but he appeared to be a person of some authority, so Mira Baz walked up to him and stood beside the table.

For some minutes, the fat little 'babu' continued to write in the book, muttering to himself as he did so. Then he looked up, his face quite without expression.

'Well,' he asked, 'what do you want?'

Mira Baz replied that he desired employment.

The babu, blinking his eyes, looked him up and down as though he was an animal in the show-ring.

'You want work, eh?' he remarked. 'But what can you do? Tell me that.'

'I am young and strong and not afraid of hard work. For the rest, I leave it to you.'

'Let me see,' he said, and went on with his writing, still muttering to himself. Then he closed the book with a bang. 'Ai, Feroze Din,' he shouted in a high-pitched voice, 'come here.'

After questioning a man who appeared to be in charge of the gang of coolies, he turned to Mira Baz, and told him that he would be taken on as a coolie at eight annas a day.

'You will start work at ~~once~~. Feroze Din, the overseer, will give you your orders—and see that you work hard.' Saying which, he opened his book and started writing in it again.

And now began a new phase of life for Mira Baz and Ziarigula. Although the joy of being together remained, the life itself was utterly distasteful. It was so different to anything they had been accustomed and they found it almost impossible to adjust themselves to the new conditions. The glamour began to fade. What had started off by being an exciting adventure had ended in a mere drab existence.

The house, in which they rented one room, stood in a mean alley in the centre of the city. It was dingy and cramped, and had the effect of making them feel disreputable and alien. They had the sensation of wild animals in a cage. The squalor of their environment was something they had not previously experienced and it appalled them. They felt trapped and had an indescribable longing for freedom. There seemed no escape.

Although he was earning enough for their keep and had even, by dint of living very simply, saved a little, this working for men he despised and the nature of his employment moved Mira Baz to disgust. I will get some better employment soon, he said to himself, but the days ran into weeks and the weeks into months and still he was a coolie earning eight annas a day. Sometimes, by working extra time, he received even twelve annas.

The winter came and passed on, to give way to the hot weather—a sweltering heat greater than they had ever experienced. It was airless in the city those days, so that its inhabitants became apathetic and lethargic. Still, Mira Baz had to work all day and had often to accept abuse from the overseer without daring to give back an answer. During those summer days, when he was forced to work in the blazing heat, the sweat would drip off his face and his clothes would be ringing wet.

Nearly always would there be something irksome to do. Sometimes, he was stacking heavy planks of wood; at others, he would be employed carrying an immense load on his back into or out of the town. There was little time allowed for rest. The contractor was determined to get his money's worth out of his employees. The months that had passed were written on Mira Baz's face and on his character. His spirit appeared to be broken.

Ziarigula, although not actually ill, never looked well. She was still beautiful, but much too thin. For hours at a time she would sit staring at nothing with eyes that seemed unnaturally large for her face. Her appearance of listlessness and depression filled Mira

Baz with remorse. There was a wistfulness about her smile nowadays that was pathetic.

Sometimes, on his return from work in the evening, he would take her to the Kabul River. It was pleasant sitting together on the bank and watching the water flow by gently. There was more air there and it was quiet.

'I should never have brought you to Nowshera, my Ziarigula,' he said in a sad, lifeless voice one such evening. 'It was not fair.'

'Never think that, beloved,' she replied gently. 'For I myself never regret it. If we were in the same position as we were in last year I would do it again gladly. I love you and you are my world. Things will be better one day.'

One evening he returned home in better spirits than for months past. October had come and the hot weather was nearly at an end, but that could hardly account for this sudden change in his outlook. He embraced Ziarigula and whispered that she was more beautiful than ever. He laughed and jested, so that Ziarigula was herself infected with this unusual spirit of gaiety and she had a ready answer to all his jokes, which she would never have thought possible. Something good has happened, she told herself, but I am not going to ask. He will tell me all in good time.

He waited until they had finished their evening meal before he let out his secret.

'Beloved,' he said suddenly, and there was a smile on his lips, 'I have good news for you. I am giving up my work here and propose that we leave Nowshera and go to Rawalpindi.'

She said not a word, but just nodded her head in approval and waited for him to continue.

'I have thought everything out. As you know, I hate my work here. I have found it intolerable but I had to continue with it in order to get some money. We have saved fifty rupees, which will be enough for our needs until I can get more work. I can now talk some Hindustani. We will travel to Rawalpindi where I am going to get employment, but I shall never work as a coolie again—that I swear. I hear Rawalpindi is a big place—even bigger than this—so there must be work to find there and I mean to get it.'

He waited to hear how she took the news.

'Oh, I am glad,' she said at last, and there was a ring in her voice. 'So glad, not for myself only, for I am of small account, but for you. Sometimes I have felt that my heart was being torn out, when I thought of you, my lord, having to demean yourself by such work. Let us go to Rawalpindi. God will be good to us—of that I am sure.'

He took her face between his hands and looked tenderly at her.

'Heart of my heart,' he said, 'you have been patient and brave all through this past year. I have been thoughtless and unkind. God willing, there are better times ahead of us.'

She pressed his hands down and put her cheek against his. 'Life of my life,' she murmured, 'I have you and that is all that matters. When do we start?'

‘To-morrow morning,’ he replied promptly. ‘We shall travel by motor bus and will arrive by evening time. This will be the first occasion for you to travel in a motor car. It is possible that the motion may make your stomach feel a trifle uneasy, but the advantage is great. They travel like the wind and save much time and labour, while the risk is small. At Rawalpindi I hope to find good employment. Inshaalah.’

Chapter VIII

MIRA BAZ FINDS FRIENDS

'DO come and look at this, Johnnie,' Anne exclaimed, fingering some material on the counter at Kirpa Ram's shop. 'I believe it's just the stuff for your pyjamas. You know you want some more.'

He walked across to her.

'Yes—that's not too bad, but I don't think I want any more pyjamas yet, Anne. I seem to have umpteen pairs already.'

'You do—of course, you do. You don't seem to realize, Johnnie, that the durzi spends most of his time on the veranda patching your old pyjamas, although I've always got lots of other work for him to do. They're simply ghastly—your pyjamas—and you really must get some more.'

'All right, darling. Have it your own way. Yes, this stuff ought to do—but isn't it a bit pansy? I mean, I'd almost feel immoral wearing that delicate shade of blue.'

'Don't be ridiculous, Johnnie. It's a lovely colour. I believe you'd always like to wear plain white or something uninteresting like that. Let's see—you'll want about five yards for one pair.' Turning to the shop assistant, 'Give me a tape-measure, will you, please?'

Measuring him, she calculated the amount of material required, and then turned again to the assistant.

'Please show me some other colours in the same material.'

'But,' John remonstrated, 'that's quite enough for the present, isn't it?'

'Of course it's not,' she answered firmly. 'You can't only have one more pair—you simply must have two. I really think you should have three new pairs, and then we could scrap those awful ones you now wear.'

'Right you are,' John said resignedly. 'Then you can give my old ones to the "sweeper". He'll look absolutely grand in them.'

Anne selected some more material.

'Well, have you finished now, darling?' John asked hopefully.

'Yes—I think so, Johnnie. I know there's something else I want, but I've stupidly gone and left my list behind in the house. Anyhow, it can't be very important and I can get it some other day. Yes, let's go.'

It was a day of November. After one more year at Peshawar, John and Anne had found themselves at Rawalpindi, the battalion having been transferred to that large cantonment the previous month. They had been lucky to find a small house in Creagh Road which suited them down to the ground. What they had so far seen of 'Pindi' they liked. People seemed friendly and, although there was no hunting to be had, there were lots of other things to do. For Anne in particular it had an additional advantage. Although no great dis-

tance from those Frontier hills, they were now in the Punjab and not the North-West Frontier Province. She considered that at 'Pindi there was less likelihood of John being suddenly sent out to fight raiders or quell riots in the city. They had had two wonderful winters at Peshawar and she looked back on them with gratitude. There was a restlessness about Peshawar, and a romance, entirely delightful and exciting for a time, which was undoubtedly lacking at 'Pindi. All the same, she was glad they were here now. There was a more settled atmosphere about the place.

As they drove along Edwardes Road on their return home, they passed a tall, broad-shouldered figure walking towards them along the footpath. Somehow the man seemed vaguely familiar to John. He was wearing the loose grey trousers of the Pathan, and a quick, furtive look of recognition had come over his face as he glanced for a moment at the driver of the car, and he had immediately turned his face away as though he wished to pass unnoticed, while at the same time he had quickened his stride.

'What are you thinking about, darling?' Anne asked. 'You look worried about something.'

'Did you see that chap who passed just now? I'm puzzling my head as to where I've met him before. He spotted me, too, but for some reason didn't want to be recognized—look here, Anne, do you mind if we drive back? It won't take a second, and it will set my mind at rest.'

'All right, darling, but don't be long, or we'll be late for lunch.'

John turned the car and drove back, but the man was no longer in Edwardes Road. He went on to the next turning, and now saw him in the distance, running.

'There he is', he said to Anne, driving fast down the side street.

As they caught him up, the man stopped and swung round, and he faced John in silence, while his eyes examined him with suspicion.

'Well, I never,' John exclaimed. 'Why, you're the Afridi we wounded in that raid last year near Peshawar, aren't you?' he asked in Pushtu. 'Your name is Mira Baz, or something like that?' And turning to Anne, he said, 'This is the chap—you remember—I told you about in Srinagar. The one I liked so much and who disappeared from hospital.'

The attitude of the man reminded John of a wild animal at bay at the end of a successful hunt. He glanced wildly round to see if any avenue of escape was still left open to him, but realized there was none—that he was caught at last and there was nothing more to do now but to await the *coup de grace*. For a second he made a final pathetic effort of defiance, which gave way to complete surrender. His mouth was a hard line, his face haggard and desperate. The deepness of his breathing gave the impression of some one who had almost run himself out in a race. He just stood searching John's face with questioning, appealing eyes.

'You are Mira Baz?'

The man nodded his head.

'What are you doing here?' John went on. 'I was told you had disappeared from that hospital at Peshawar. What happened to you? I'd be interested to know.'

'Sahib, it is a long story,' Mira Baz replied simply, looking into John's face. 'I cannot tell it all here, for it will take time and would delay you and mem-sahib. I would like to relate it to you—because you were kind to me in hospital.—I believe you are my friend. I believe you would understand.'

John took a note-book from his pocket and wrote in it.

'Look here,' he said, tearing the page out and handing it to Mira Baz. 'I have written my address on this bit of paper.—I live at 153 Creagh Road—it is in that direction—but any one will tell you where it is. Come to my house this afternoon at about half-past two and tell me everything. I should like to help you—if you want help.'

'I will gladly come, sahib,' he replied, and relief showed in his face. 'You are very kind. I will tell you all. I have now much hope.'

'Well, Anne, let's get along.—Salaam, Mira Baz—don't forget—this afternoon at half-past two. I'll be expecting you.'

Mira Baz put up his hand to his forehead in a note of salute as they drove off.

'I'm awfully glad we met that chap. What did you make of him, darling?'

'I think he's got one of the nicest faces I've seen for a long time, but one of the saddest,' she replied. 'I took to him at once. I wish Abdul looked like that. The way that old man creeps about the house with his lugubrious face always infuriates me.'

'Oh ! Abdul is simply hopeless. I ticked him off yesterday properly for giving me a coat with a large stain on the back. I didn't notice it until I'd returned from parade—what the men thought of it I don't know. I really think we'll have to sack the old fool and get another bearer. He's too old for the job, and he doesn't even try now. I expect he believes he's indispensable, but he'll jolly soon find out he isn't.'

'I quite agree. We might look out for another servant to replace him. If he knows we are doing it, probably he will buck up—but if he doesn't, I think he ought to go.'

They were sitting on the veranda after lunch when Mira Baz came up the drive. Behind him walked Ziarigula.

'Sterre mashe, sahib,' he said, salaaming.

'Kwar mashe,' John made the customary reply.

They came up the steps and on to the veranda.

'Oh, what a sweet-looking girl.' Anne remarked. 'Do look at her, Johnnie. She's beautiful.'

As she said this, Ziarigula looked up at her and smiled almost as though she understood; then turning her head away in shyness, she moved farther along the veranda and sat down.

'Sahib, I have come to tell you my story,' Mira Baz began, sitting on the ground in front of John. 'It will take a long time, for there is much to tell. I am in hope that it will not tire you—that you will listen to the end. It is of great importance to me, as I want advice, and I believe you can give it to me. I feel you are my friend.'

John remained silent, and merely nodded his head in assent.

After a slight pause, Mira Baz continued.

'I have brought with me my wife, for she counts greatly in my story. In fact, if it was not for her I should now be at my home in Tirah—but miserable. There would be no story to tell. As it is—I am happy in our great love for one another—for that, praise be to Allah—but unhappy because we are away from our country and cannot return—we are outcasts without friends, occupation, or money—and it is so difficult it makes me afraid.'

He paused to clear his throat, and before he continued he glanced quickly at John's face. There was in his eyes an appeal, as though he was striving desperately to impress his hearers but was not sure if he was being successful, not certain if he was believed. He had spoken mainly in Hindustani, with a few words of Pushtu thrown in here and there, and his speech was slow and halting, as if he was searching for words. It was apparent that he spoke in a language with which he was not fully acquainted, and that an effort of memory and much care was required to remember the correct words.

'I am speaking in Hindustani, sahib, of which I have learnt a little, because you may be able to understand me more easily—it is so important that you should understand. I will speak slowly. But whether my Hindustani is easier to understand than your Pushtu, only God knows.' And now a smile lighted his features. 'I well remember the days when you visited me in hospital at Peshawar. You were very

kind in those days, sahib, but I had great difficulty in understanding what you said.'

'Well, I call that a bit thick,' John exclaimed, breaking into laughter, in which Mira Baz joined. 'My wonderful Pushtu. Passed Lower Standard, too! I did try so hard. Well, carry on, Mira Baz.'

He started from the beginning, telling them of his love for Ziarigula and how, being poor, it was impossible to obtain permission to marry her.

'It is a bad custom—this paying of a bride price,' he explained. 'It accounts for so many young Pathans remaining unmarried.'

He described the plan for the raid and the reason he took part in it—its failure and the period he spent in hospital at Peshawar. When he related the story of his escape, his determination to kill Tor Gul and the actual murder, he spoke simply and without embarrassment.

'You may not understand, sahib,' he remarked. 'We people across the border have no laws to bind us. We consider that to achieve an object, the killing of a person is not only permissible but is often the only sensible thing to do. I killed Tor Gul. I admit it. I feel justified, as Ziarigula, my wife, loved me and I loved her and in no other way could I have obtained her.'

He related the story of their flight, the farewell to his parents, and their entry into British India. 'Then—and only then—I realized to the full that we were outcasts, that the world was against us and we belonged nowhere. We travelled to Nowshera and there I was forced to accept employment under a Hindu contractor, a man whom I despised and hated.'

'So you went to Nowshera and worked as a coolie under a Hindu contractor,' John said slowly, almost to himself. 'How you must have loathed it.'

'It is impossible to tell you how much I hated it, sahib,' he answered. 'But what was I to do? I had no home and no money. The memory of that period of humiliation will remain with me for ever, sahib. After a year of suffering and insult, I found it intolerable. My wife was not well and I realized that I was responsible for dragging her down with me. I considered that even death would be a better fate than remaining as a coolie under such circumstances. We must all die sometime.' He checked himself. 'I left Nowshera with my wife and came to Rawalpindi to get work and earn some money. But it seems that employment is impossible to obtain—the fact that I am a trans-border Pathan is against me. The money I have saved is nearly exhausted. What am I to do, sahib? You are my friend—I see it in your face that you are and so is the mem-sahib. What are we to do?—Now you know my story, sahib?' he ended quietly. Throughout he had spoken with the simplest sincerity. 'I ask for your advice—your help. I come to you now because I trust you. The rest of the world appears to be against us. All I have done has been for the love of a woman—that love still remains—and will remain so long as life is in us.'

During the narration of his story, although there had been a strong note of supplication in his voice, as was only natural, there had been no suggestion of cringing, no apology. Never did he raise his voice unduly nor become emotional. The dignity of his demeanour and the very simplicity of his words showed an unusual

element of gallantry and pride which went to the hearts of his listeners.

Now, Ziarigula rose to her feet, and, coming towards Anne, she dropped on her knees in front of her, sitting back on her heels and laying her two hands on Anne's.

'Mem-sahib, I come to you, not for myself, but for my man,' she said in Pushtu, looking up into Anne's face. 'Help us, for we have no friends in this land of India.'

Anne could not trust herself to speak.

As silence fell over them, Ziarigula waited for a reply, her head thrown back, her lips parted in suspense.

'Come into the house, Anne,' John said suddenly. 'There's something I'd like to discuss with you. I've just had an idea.' Turning to Mira Baz: 'Stay here until we return. We shall be back in a few minutes.'

'Well, darling, what do you think about it all?' he asked, when they were in the drawing-room together. 'I must say I'm damned sorry for those two.'

'So am I, Johnnie. I couldn't understand all he said, of course, but I got his meaning all right. It was heart-rending, and I felt I could have cried. He's got such a nice face—and that beautiful girl——'

'Yes, she is a beauty, isn't she? I didn't think I'd better give more than a quick glance at her, but what I saw convinced me on that point.'

Anne smiled.

'I thought you wouldn't miss that, Johnnie. I wonder if a pretty girl has ever escaped your notice!

But, seriously, we must do something to help them. I believed all he said. I'm certain he was speaking the truth. He must be the most consummate actor if he wasn't.'

'I've had an idea. You remember we were discussing Abdul this morning and we both agreed that he was getting so slack and beyond his work.'

'Yes.'

'We also suggested telling him that we'd get another bearer if he didn't buck up. Well—and here's my brain-wave—why not take Mira Baz on as an assistant bearer? He couldn't become a full blown bearer at once in any case, as he doesn't know the job, but he could work under Abdul, to start with, and learn.'

'Yes—and if Abdul doesn't mend his ways and continues to be lazy, we could tell him to go and this Pathan could take his place as he'd have learnt by then.'

'I think that's a grand idea. Who says I never suggest anything sensible? Nobody will know he once took part in a raid. How can they know, if we don't give away the secret? Shall we go out now and tell them?'

'Half a minute, darling,' Anne said, taking him by the arm. 'We haven't decided what pay we'll give him. Of course, it will cost a bit more. Can we afford it?'

'Yes, I think so—quite easily. I suggest twenty rupees a month to start with. Of course, if he takes Abdul's place later we'd give him more. What shall we say, twenty or twenty-five?'

'I think twenty, Johnnie. We could raise it in a month or two if he learns quickly and we find he is useful.'

'Right. Twenty it is. Come on, darling—let's break the news to them.'

They went outside, and, seeing them, Mira Baz stood up, a worried look of expectancy on his face.

'We have been discussing how we can help you,' John said to him. 'We want to help if we possibly can. Would you like to learn the work of bearer in our house? You would find it difficult at first, as the work will be new, but you would learn under our present bearer, Abdul. We would pay you twenty rupees a month to start with, but you would get more later if you learn quickly. Of course, you would also get a servant's house in the compound. Tell me, would you like that?'

For a while Mira Baz gave no answer. His eyes looked at John as though he could not yet fully understand the meaning of what had been said to him, as if a miracle had happened. His tongue ran over his lips.

'Sahib,' he replied slowly at last. 'You will never regret what you have offered me. Words are poor things—they cannot properly express my thanks or what I feel. All I can say is that I will serve you with my life.'

He turned to Ziarigula and said something to her in Pushtu. With a low cry she ran forward and threw herself on the ground in front of Anne, sheltering her face in her hands, and murmuring her thanks, so that tears came into Anne's eyes and she sat silent.

‘Well, that’s settled then,’ John said, relieving the tension. ‘You can either come here and take up your quarters to-day or to-morrow morning, but the sooner you start work the better.’

‘We shall return this evening, sahib. I repeat that you will never regret having employed me.’

And after salaaming they walked down the drive and into the road.

Chapter IX

RUMOURS OF WAR

MIRA BAZ took up his duties the following morning. The interval of less than a day had produced the most astonishing change in his appearance. The years seemed to have slipped away from him, and he now looked a different being—alert and happy. Apparently the memory of the hardship and disappointment of the previous year had been relegated to the past. He gave the impression of a person who had complete confidence in the future.

Abdul, although showing no great enthusiasm over the prospect of having to train an assistant, who might one day oust him from his present lucrative and comfortable post, accepted the situation with outward equanimity.

He showed Mira Baz the sahib's collection of clothes, and how to fold them correctly. He described the occasion when each article of clothing was worn and the system of sending them to the 'dhobi'.* Boots, shoes, belts—in fact, everything in John's possession was exhibited and duly noted by Mira Baz, who had never in his life before seen such an abundance of wearing apparel owned by one person. What were they all for? Why did the sahib have to change his

*Washerman.

clothes so often? Surely this amount was not really necessary!

'This bottle contains fruit salt,' Abdul said gravely. 'It is brought to the sahib's bedside every morning with his "chota hazri" * together with a small spoon and a glass of water. Sahib gets very angry if it is forgotten.'

Mira Baz nodded his head.

'Also,' Abdul went on, fondling the bottle of Eno as though it was a pearl of great price, 'you must never pour any of the white powder from the bottle into the tumbler—the sahib likes doing that himself. Once I did so, and the sahib, thinking he himself had done it, poured some water on top and drank it quickly. He was scarcely awake. He was so angry that I left the room hastily.' And he laughed gently to himself, remembering that morning.

Mira Baz noted this for future guidance. This was of importance—apparently the sahib set great store by it. He would certainly remember.

'I will not forget,' he remarked.

Although Mira Baz felt at first that he would never master the intricacies of a bearer's job, he was, in actual fact, a most promising pupil. He studied what Abdul did with an earnestness that was almost laughable. He never seemed to forget anything he had once learned. Somehow he felt at home here. The Mathesons were showing him a kindness that he had never before experienced, and he answered readily to it, as an animal will learn and remember new tricks if handled kindly, which he would never do if treated harshly.

* Early morning tea.

Almost immediately after they had decided to take him on as a servant, Anne had had misgivings. 'How will it all turn out?' she asked herself. 'Will he steal? Can this man, who reminded her of a splendid wild animal, ever settle down to the humdrum life of a servant in an orderly household?' But seeing him now, her mind was at rest.

'Mira Baz is going to make good,' she remarked to John. 'I've no doubt about it. He's such a quick learner.'

'Yes, I agree. I think he's going to turn out well. I'm so glad we've been able to help him. It's been worth it, Anne.'

'It most certainly has.'

Those were happy days for Mira Baz. Here was an unaccustomed security, an atmosphere of goodwill, in sharp contrast to the uneasiness and drudgery of the past year. He was conscious of a contentment of mind which he would not have believed possible. Both he and Ziarigula were feeding well and living in comfortable surroundings, with a corresponding benefit to their health. He felt under a debt of gratitude to the Mathesons, which he sincerely hoped one day to be in a position to repay.

Mira Baz had now been working in the Mathesons' house for over four months. Abdul was also, still holding down his job. They had not had the heart to dismiss Abdul, who, realizing that Mira Baz had made such progress and was now a serious rival, had pulled himself together. His work, although not first-class, was fairly satisfactory. They found it was quite useful to have Mira Baz as an extra servant, as he was now a reasonably

efficient khitmatgar,* and could be used to wait at table when they gave dinner-parties.

Besides, the hot weather was not far off, when it would be necessary for Anne to go to the hills for the summer, leaving John behind at Rawalpindi. It was decided that Abdul would accompany Anne, while Mira Baz acted as bearer for John.

'I shall be quite happy, darling, to have Mira Baz with me,' John remarked. 'He's really quite good now. Of course, he makes mistakes; but, at any rate, he does always try, which is more than I can say for Abdul. Yes—on the whole, he's not at all bad.'

It was at this time that news of a disturbing nature about Waziristan began to be circulated. All sorts of rumours flew round the station. A column operating from Razmak up the Shaktu Valley had not only been heavily sniped at night, but a road protection piquet had been rushed, and the tribesmen had even had the temerity to carry out an attack on the rearguard. Of course, we had inflicted heavy casualties on them, but a couple of British officers had been hit and several Indian ranks killed or wounded. It was all most unexpected, as during the past year there had been a period of almost complete peace in Waziristan. There had been several cases of kidnapping of Hindus, and, more than once, lorries travelling along the main Bannu-Razmak Road had been fired on recently. It was just as bad towards the Derajat, and a most daring raid had been made on Tank.

Various officers on short leave from Waziristan painted lurid pictures of the situation up there to 'Pindi residents over their drinks in the Club bar.

* Waiter.

‘Honestly, old boy, you’d be appalled if you came up there now and saw what it is like. You remember what Razmak was in ’34—peace, perfect peace, wasn’t it? Well, I promise you it’s quite different now. Why, you can’t move outside the blinking place, unless you go out with the whole Brigade, and even then it’s damned dangerous.’

‘And some of the Frontier Scouts’ posts are beleaguered to all intents and purposes. Rationed once a fortnight, can’t leave their fort, and hanging on by their eyelids.’

‘Yes,’ some one else put in. ‘Something will have to be done about it soon, or there’ll be trouble—mark my words. There’s somebody behind all this business, but nobody seems to know who the hell it is.’

‘Anyhow, we’re nice and safe in ’Pindi for a few days, thank God, so let’s make the most of it. What’s yours, old boy?—and you, Tom—same again?’

Of course, John and Anne heard all the news and read about it in the paper.

‘Thank goodness we’re in ’Pindi, Johnnie,’ she said brightly. ‘There’s not much chance of your battalion being sent there, is there?’

‘I shouldn’t think it’s in the least likely. They’ve got about a division of troops in Waziristan already, and that ought to be sufficient—it they want more, I expect either the Abbottabad or Jhelum brigades would be sent up. I can’t believe they would send the whole ’Pindi Division.’

‘Well, that’s comforting, at any rate. What’s it all about, Johnnie?’

‘Oh, some fakir or mullah has been stirring up the Wazirs and Mahsuds—been pretty successful with the former, particularly with the Tori Khel Wazirs, who are a large, well-armed tribe. I understand he’s not made much headway with the Mahsuds, but you never know. The Waziristan tribes—both the Mahsuds and Wazirs—keep aloof from the other trans-border people and their hands seem to be against every one, and every one’s hand is against them, but they’re about the best natural fighters in the world—regular tigers at the game.’

‘The old Frontier,’ she murmured. ‘I wonder if it will ever settle down.’

And then, a few days later—it was a Sunday—they were sitting at lunch when a letter was handed to him.

‘Hullo,’ he remarked, opening it carelessly. ‘I wonder what old Banks has got to write about—sent from the office on a Sunday too—that’s all wrong.’

As he read it she watched his face and could see it was something serious.

He sat for a moment in thought. Anne, a sudden pang seizing her, also remained silent. Then, drawing a long breath and without raising her eyes, she spoke in a low, faltering voice.

‘Johnnie,’ she asked anxiously. ‘What is it? What’s in that letter?’

‘It’s about the battalion for Waziristan,’ he replied gently.

For a moment she flinched as though she had been struck. Her lips felt dry and she could hardly speak.

‘But does it mean that the battalion is going there soon?’

John did not answer at once.

‘Yes,’ he said at last. ‘We entrain to-morrow evening.’

She made an impulsive little movement of her hand. ‘Oh, Johnnie,’ she said, and a note of pain had crept into her voice. ‘Just as I thought we were so secure here. It’s hateful.’ And the instant she had spoken, she regretted it.

‘I’m sorry for taking it so badly, my darling,’ she said quietly, setting a hand upon his arm. ‘I know it will give you a chance. I know it’s what you went into the army for—but I loathe your going.’

‘I don’t expect it will last long, Anne. It certainly won’t if they put a sufficient number of troops into Waziristan. Don’t you worry, darling. We’ll be back in no time.’

‘Well, we must see about your kit, Johnnie. There’s not much time—to-morrow evening—it’s horribly short. What do you think about servants? Would you like to take Abdul? I can easily carry on with Mira Baz. Yes, darling, you’d better take Abdul. He knows the ropes and has been with you in camp so often.’

‘No, I wouldn’t dream of taking Abdul. He’s got to stay with you. Mira Baz would be simply hopeless with all your dresses, face cream and what not. I’ll take Mira Baz. He’ll learn very soon, and I’ll have an orderly to help him, but, in any case, there is very little for him to do in camp. Being an Afridi, he won’t like the Mahsuds and Wazirs, so might be quite useful.’

‘All right, Johnnie, but I do hope he won’t let you down.’

Mira Baz, on being told of the proposed arrangement, raised his hand to his forehead in a gesture of assent.

‘It shall be as the sahib wishes,’ he replied. ‘I am his servant and I will carry out his orders with gladness.’

He did not move away, but just stood there, looking on the ground and tracing a pattern on the floor with his toe, like a small girl at a party who was overcome with shyness. It was obvious that he wanted to say something, but was so filled with embarrassment that he dared not utter a word. The attitude was so completely out of keeping with the magnificent presence of the man, that John burst out laughing.

‘Well, what is it, Mira Baz?’ he asked. ‘There’s something on your mind.’

‘I hope,’ he said slowly, still looking bashfully on the ground, ‘that my wife will be permitted to remain here, because she is to give birth to a child shortly.’

‘Well, I never—why the devil didn’t you tell us so before?’ John exclaimed. ‘That’s simply splendid. Of course, she’ll stay here. The mem-sahib will look after her, so there’ll be nothing to worry about. Anne darling,’ he shouted to her in the other room. ‘Mira Baz’s wife is going to have a baby. Isn’t that grand?’

‘Oh, I’m so glad,’ she said, hurriedly entering the room.

But this was too much for Mira Baz, who turned tail and bolted through the farther door.

There was a large crowd at the station to see the battalion off the following evening. The platform

appeared to be packed. The whole Rawalpindi Brigade was under orders for Waziristan, one battalion having already left earlier in the day, while the remaining battalions were to entrain the next day.

The Indian ranks filed into their carriages in orderly silence. Opposite the officers' carriages stood the officers' wives and a number of friends chatting together.

'It's horrible, Anne—this parting— isn't it?' Mrs. Witherby, the wife of the second-in-command, murmured. 'This isn't the first time I've had to do it, but it never gets any better. I'll never get used to it.'

'It's simply foul,' Anne replied, biting her lip. And to herself she prayed, 'Oh, God, don't let me cry. Please, God, don't let me make a fool of myself in front of all these people.'

Emerging from the carriage, which John was to share with three other officers, Mira Baz walked towards her. He was dressed in khaki as worn by all the officers' servants of the battalion.

'Mem-sahib,' he said gravely. 'I will look after the sahib's welfare—do not worry—with God's help, all will be well, Inshaalah. I shall never forget what he and you have done for me—I speak from my heart. Salaam, mem-sahib.'

'Salaam, Mira Baz.' And now the tears filled her eyes and her voice shook so that she had to turn away.

She saw John coming towards her.

'Well,' he said cheerfully. 'My company's settled in all right.' And taking her by the arm, he led her to one side of the crowd. 'I'll write directly we reach

our destination, darling—probably send you a line from Mari Indus.’

‘Yes—do, Johnnie, if you can. You know how I’ll be longing to hear. I’ll write every day, but don’t expect much in the way of news, as I’ll be leading a very quiet life without you.’

‘Quiet life! Can I see you doing that! Anyhow, don’t get off with too many boy friends—think of me upholding the prestige of the British Empire.’ They both managed to laugh. ‘I hope you won’t have any difficulty over your move to Murree, Anne. When is it you go? On the fourth—Monday week—isn’t it?’

‘Yes, Johnnie—in ten days’ time.’

Isn’t this blinking train ever going to start, he thought.

There was the sound of a whistle.

He put his hand on her shoulder and kissed her.

‘Take care of yourself,’ she whispered. ‘I love you, Johnnie.’

‘And I love you, my sweet. Bless you.’

A few minutes later the train started to move, the wheels grew louder and more urgent as it gradually gathered speed. Sepoys leaned from the passing windows, laughing and cheering. Anne caught a misty glimpse of John waving to her in the distance.

As she walked out of the station, she felt more alone than she had ever done in her life before.

Chapter X

LIFE IN WAZIRISTAN

THE column wound its way slowly along a broad, boulder-strewn, nullah, flanked on either side by the bare, gaunt hills of Waziristan. It was a tiring, soul-destroying road to travel, with its uneven surface of large and small stones. The country was cheerless, and, except for patches of camel-thorn bushes on the hill-side, appeared to be without vegetation.

If one looked carefully towards the tops of the hills on either side of the nullah, one could see, on many of them, small clumps of men occupying piquet positions for the protection of the troops marching along the bed of the nullah and the long line of camel and mule transport moving behind.

Just below these piquets, small white patches were visible against the dark background of the hill—these were screens indicating the position of the piquets, placed there mainly for the information of the rearguard commander and the mountain battery, which would support the piquet in its withdrawal, by fire, if necessary.

The troops plodded on through this inhospitable, sparsely populated country, which consisted of a tumbled mass of jagged hills and stony nullahs, its

contours following no ordered plan. Occasionally they came across a small mud village with one or two watch-towers standing sentinel over it, but no human being lived behind its walls. Possibly an emaciated pariah dog, self-appointed guardian, would rush out of the village towards them, barking shrilly with its tail between its legs, and would then run back in alarm at the near approach of the troops to reappear and continue its high-pitched barking from the roof of one of the houses. Otherwise the village lay deserted and uncared for.

The country-side appeared to be completely uninhabited. However, the troops had good reason to know that this was not the case, for often a body of tribesmen would be encountered suddenly—sometimes in the most unexpected spot—a sharp action would ensue, and the tribesmen would withdraw, vanishing into thin air as mysteriously as they had arrived, knowing that a policy of ‘hit and run’ paid them well against their better and more modern armed opponents.

Mira Baz, trudging along with the regimental followers at the back of the transport, had already come to the conclusion that war, as fought by the British, was a dismal business. They marched on and on under a cloudless blue sky and the atmosphere in the nullah was stuffy and airless.

His life at that time seemed to consist of a long route march by day through bleak and ugly country, with his real work coming at the end of it. It was then—when he was tired and hungry after the march—that he had to set to work digging a hole, with the assistance of some sepoy, for his sahib to sleep in—so that he should be protected from snipers’ bullets—pre-

pare the bivouac and generally look after the welfare of his master. He soon realized that, in many ways, the servant's tasks on a Frontier campaign are more difficult than those of a fighting man.

And then, at night, when the snipers were active and bullets would whine over the camp, he had to lie in a hole on the ground, wedged in between two other men, without being allowed to take any action to check the offender. Sometimes he thought he would dearly love to have a rifle in his hand and, creeping out of the camp, stalk that thrice-accursed tribesman who was causing all this trouble and preventing them from getting some well-deserved and much-needed sleep, and end his days on this earth.

Meanwhile, the heavily laden camels in front of him jolted slowly up the dry bed of the nullah, gurgling and snarling—carefully placing the soft pads of their feet on the ground as they walked with a mincing gait.

The battalion had now been in Waziristan for two months. Those officers in the Rawalpindi Club bar had not exaggerated the situation in Waziristan. In fact, since that time, it had deteriorated even further. The whole country appeared to be in a ferment. The Mahsuds had now joined the Wazirs in their campaign against the British, and the Bhattanis in the Derajat were showing distinct signs of unrest. The mullahs and their lieutenants were, according to their own lights, doing their work well.

The Force Commander had now a large number of troops under his command, but, nevertheless, had an unenviable job. His great difficulty was to get an opportunity to come to grips with this elusive enemy,

who, naturally, followed the lines of guerilla warfare and, besides possessing a great courage, was an adept at the use of ground and camouflage. He felt like a man who was looking for a needle in a haystack, but, unfortunately, the needle was in the hand of another person, who, every now and then, pushed it suddenly out of the hay, pricked him unmercifully, and then hurriedly withdrew it.

On arrival in Waziristan the Rawalpindi Brigade had marched at first to Razani, whence it operated towards Datta Khel, but later it had been moved elsewhere. From its present camp it moved out periodically for a few days at a time on receipt of news of enemy gangs in the neighbourhood. So far, except for brushes with small parties of Mahsuds and heavy sniping at night, there had been no opportunity to pin the enemy down to a battle.

Now, owing to the unrest in the Derajat, orders had been received to locate detachments of regular troops in the small obsolete forts in that area, which were at present garrisoned by the Frontier Constabulary. With this object, the Brigade was on the march—it was to visit each dilapidated fort, leaving the required garrison with rations for a month and to move on to the next fort when it would do likewise.

John Matheson's company was detailed to garrison one of the farthestmost forts, situated on the edge of the Derajat Plain and close to the foot-hills. Being almost on the border-line dividing the Mahsud and Bhattani country, it was, at the present juncture, a position of some importance, and also owing to its distance from headquarters, of some danger.

The nullah grew wider and wider until the column came out on to a plateau ringed round by low hills. The Brigadier decided to halt here for the night, and he gave orders regarding the position and strength of the piquets to be posted on the hills around for the protection of the camp.

When Mira Baz and the other followers arrived, hot and dusty, with the transport on the camp-site, they were led by a sepoy to the area allotted to the battalion. The Indian ranks were already hard at work erecting a sangar* and digging holes in the ground for bivouacs. The camels, snarling and growling and generally showing their dislike of man, were made to sit down and were unloaded.

From the vantage-point of one of the hill-tops, the busy camp below resembled a beehive. Hundreds of people moving restlessly to and fro, some unloading the transport and carrying the loads to their allotted place, others collecting stones and building sangars, many digging. No one appeared to be idle. A business-like activity was the key-note of the scene.

Mira Baz, assisted by a fatigue-party, now prepared the bivouac, opened up the bedding and got out a shirt, slacks, socks, and shoes for John to change into. As he was doing this, John arrived, having been with his company until now.

'Well, Mira Baz,' he said cheerfully, taking off his sweat-grimed shirt, 'how did it go with you to-day? Pretty foul march, wasn't it?'

*Stone wall.

'The day was over-hot and the transport moved at a snail's pace. Never have I seen such a country, sahib. It is only fit for Mahsuds and Wazirs.'

'Anyhow—all being well—we'll be nice and snug in our fort in three days' time. There you'll be able to get lots of sleep and rest.'

'Inshaalah.'

But the Brigade was to get little sleep that night.

Mira Baz, having had his food and cleaned his master's boots, lay in his pit, but sleep did not come to him at once. He lay on his back for a while, thinking of Ziarigula—his thoughts evoked pictures of her in all her beauty and sweetness. He wondered how she was and if the baby had yet been born. It should happen any day now. God grant that it may be a son, he prayed. Then he yawned, turned over on his side, and, almost immediately, fell asleep.

The Brigade had taken itself off to bed, tired out after a long day under a relentless sun. Except for the low, almost imperceptible murmur of hundreds of persons in deep slumber, like the gentle surge of the sea on a calm night, the restless movement of animals as they pulled at their heel ropes, an occasional cough, a long drawn-out snore, the muffled voice of some one talking in his sleep, silence reigned. The sentries round the walled perimeter and those inside the camp were alone alert. There was no moon, but the sky was strewn with a myriad stars, undimmed by cloud. The camp-fires, now smouldering, suffused a dim glow in their immediate vicinity but, otherwise, the night was of an inky blackness.

It was about eleven o'clock.

Suddenly, without any warning, the silence of the night was rudely shattered by a rattle of musketry from low down on the hill-side to the north. A fusillade of bullets swept over the camp, some ricocheted off stones and whined away into the distance, one undoubtedly found a victim, for there was a scream from a man in agony. The firing continued without abatement.

This was not the action of one or two snipers bent on merely disturbing the camp and inflicting one or two casualties maybe, but was the concentrated fire of a large body of men who must have crept under cover of darkness between the camp piquets. Surely it must be the prelude to a determined attack on the camp itself, Mira Baz thought. He felt decidedly uncomfortable, but realized he could do nothing. A sudden urge of hatred for the enemy tribesmen swept over him.

And then the insistent blowing of a whistle, taken up by all units, informed him that the Brigade was being ordered to 'stand to' on its alarm posts. Every evening without fail, since the Brigade had arrived in Waziristan, a practice 'stand to' had been carried out, so that every man knew instinctively where to go when the 'alarm' sounded, and they now tumbled out of their shelters and ran to their posts.

It was a matter of seconds for Mira Baz to leap out of his pit, cover the short distance to the allotted place, and flatten himself on the ground where he and the other followers came under the orders of the Quartermaster of the battalion. Still the firing went on. It was obvious that the animals were suffering heavily and it sounded as if there was something like confusion in the animal lines.

Then the firing stopped abruptly, ending as suddenly as it had begun.

'This is the signal for an attack on the camp, I'm sure it is', Mira Baz said to himself. 'While one party has been firing, the remainder have been moving closer to the camp from a flank.'

A few seconds later a Verey light sailed into the air, to be followed by others from the perimeter of the camp, so that the ground in front was lit up, as though a searchlight was playing on it. A scattered mob of tribesmen, numbering several hundreds, could be now clearly seen advancing towards the western flank of the camp.

Immediately there was a roar of fire from the western perimeter—the sharp rat-tat of machine-guns and light automatics, the rapid fire from rifles along that face. A section of Mountain Artillery was firing over open sights from the cover of the camp. The sound was deafening. And now fear receded from Mira Baz.

The result was not long in doubt. Mahsuds and Wazirs are prompt to recognize failure. They soon realized that they stood not the ghost of a chance in the open under the murderous fire from the defenders. It was a gallant attempt, and Mira Baz secretly applauded them for their show of bravery and recklessness, but, fortunately, it had been spotted in time. Thereafter the issue was decided. Many tribesmen could be seen out in front, lying lifeless or grievously wounded. The remainder wavered, and then dashed back to the cover of the hills.

For the remainder of that night a proportion of the troops got no more sleep, for the inlying piquets, which

comprised about a quarter of the force, were ordered to remain 'standing-to'. Although the attack had been beaten off with heavy loss, it could not be assumed that the enemy would not attempt later another attack on a different sector.

At last the eastern sky began to pale, and a greyness crept over the country-side. The men of the inlying piquets looked wan and pinched in the faint light. As visibility increased with the growing light, some extent of the damage done to the enemy was revealed, although it could be taken as certain that, in addition to what could be seen, a number of less seriously wounded must have got away under cover of darkness. Dotted about the ground, between two and three hundred yards from the perimeter wall, lay several twisted figures, while some men still moved. One could be seen dragging himself by his hands along the ground towards cover, stopping and lying prone every few yards before continuing his pitifully slow progress.

But, except for the dead and wounded lying out in the open, not a sign of the enemy was to be seen. Once again he had vanished into thin air.

The casualties among the Brigade were not heavy, and had all been incurred from the enemy fire—it was too concentrated to be labelled sniping—from the hill-side previous to the attack. Two officers had been wounded, one seriously, while twenty-two Indian ranks had been killed or wounded. Owing to their exposed position, the animals had, as usual, suffered the most severely, and a number of mules of the Mountain Artillery and also of the transport had been hit.

As the march that day was to end at a spot on the main road, a wireless message was sent to Force

Headquarters reporting the enemy attack on the camp and asking for motor-ambulances to be sent to the camp-site to convey the wounded to hospital. For the march to the main road, the wounded were to be carried on camel 'kajawahs'—a form of stretcher used by the Field ambulances on the North-West Frontier for disabled men, quite the most uncomfortable contraptions imaginable, but, apparently, the most suitable arrangement, for, after exhaustive tests and experiments, no better apparatus for the carriage of wounded across country had been evolved. A camel carried two kajawahs, hung on either side of a pack-saddle.

At six o'clock the advanced guard, consisting of a mountain battery and one battalion, marched out of camp, to be followed by the main body an hour later. At the tail of the main body, and behind the long line of transport, marched Mira Baz and the regimental followers.

On many of the hill-tops, right away into the distance, he could spot, with his keen sight, the road-protection piquets. These had been sent out by the advanced guard commander, and were already in position, their white piqueting screens lower down the hill showing up against the dark background.

Chapter XI

ARRIVAL AT THE FORT

TWO days later—it was June 2nd to be exact—the column arrived at the farthermost fort to be garrisoned. After the attack on the camp, the remainder of the march had passed off without incident.

The country through which they had moved had the appearance of a land unpopulated and uncared for. The squalid villages, nothing more than a collection of mud shanties, were abandoned and in a state of crumbling ruin. The grass on the hill-sides had been burnt yellow by the fierce summer sun. They were now in the low country of Waziristan, bordering the Derajat, and the heat in the daytime was indescribable.

‘I’m afraid I can’t tell you, Matheson, how long you’ll have to be here,’ the Brigadier remarked. ‘It all depends on the situation. As you know, I am putting in a month’s rations for your detachment. I hope you won’t have to stay as long as that, but one can’t tell at present. In any case, it will save our having to come down here again with more rations for you. The reserve tank in the fort should contain sufficient water for you all for about a fortnight, but if I was you, I’d see that it’s kept full. Don’t let any one use it without orders—I’d issue strict orders about that. All water, both for drinking and washing purposes, should

be drawn from the stream outside—can't think who the fool was who built a fort without a well inside. If by any chance the fort was besieged, the tribesmen would find no difficulty in diverting the stream. Where would you be then? Have to fall back on your reserve supply—but that's not going to last for ever.'

'It does sound a bit foolish, sir,' John replied. 'However, I'll keep a watch on that water in the reserve tank. I'll also put out a piquet guarding the stream itself.'

'Yes, I think it would be advisable—but, even then, they could divert the stream farther up, and, I repeat, what the hell do you do then? Use your water reserve, you say. Yes, but suppose some ass has been surreptitiously taking water out of the tank to save himself the trouble of going to the stream? So guard that tank as if it contained precious jewels.'

John nodded his head.

'Very good, sir. I'll remember that.—About situation reports, sir. Do you want them sent more than once a day?'

'The Brigade-Major will be issuing orders about that. I think I said I wanted a report to be sent at eight o'clock every morning and again in the evening, and I believe Force Headquarters also want a report sent direct.—Can't quite remember the time. Anyhow, you'll get definite orders about that. I wish I could give you a wireless set, but I'm afraid I can't spare one. I'd have felt happier if you had a wireless all this distance away from headquarters. However, can't be helped. 'You've got helios for day work and lamps for night, so it ought to be all right. Oh, by

the way, you can't signal direct from here to the Brigade camp, but Simpson will tell you the chain of communication—I know there's one intermediate station, at least, from here, if not two.'

'Right—I'll find that out, sir. I haven't been all over the fort yet, but I understand the signalling is done from that tower.' He pointed to a tower at the north-west corner of the fort.

'Well, Matheson,' the Brigadier said genially. 'I hope all will go well with you and you have no difficulties. I must say I don't much like the look of things in Waziristan at present—most unsatisfactory—but you can never tell. These transborder tribesmen are such temperamental chaps—up in arms, black hatred in their hearts, and nothing's too bad for the British one moment—a week later they're as peaceful as lambs.'

'Yes, they do seem to be like that.'

'Of course they are,' he went on. 'It's amazing what religious fervour does to people. 'It seems to stir up all their worst passions. I suppose you've read some history in your time?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Well, I wonder if you've realized how many wars and disturbances have been started over differences in religion—a hell of a lot. And the stupid thing is that there is very little fundamental difference between any religions. Practically all people believe in a God—it's only that they don't all try to get into touch with God in the same way.'

Brigadier Carden, a little man with a shrewd, kindly face, noticeably active eyes, and a vigorous manner, had

done most of his service in a Frontier Force regiment. Thirty-two years' service, mostly on the North-West Frontier, had left its accustomed mark, but had not impaired his physique, which was still wiry and alert. There were few officers serving in India at that time who had as great a knowledge of the Frontier tribes and their various characteristics and methods. There were none who had a wider experience of Frontier fighting. He was not only immensely popular with all ranks under his command but was respected.

'Must be getting along now—you've got lots of work to do and so have I. I saw the motor dispatch-rider arrive just now, so I'm afraid Simpson will have a pile of stuff waiting for me to do—can't get away from this damned office work, even on column—and most of it's piffle. I've never got used to those office files, sitting on the table and leering at me with a baleful eye. I always feel forced to sign them, just to get the damned things taken out of my sight. Anyhow, I hope the English mail's in and I get a letter from my wife. I packed her off home when this show started. We thought she was better off there with the children than hanging about in India on the odd chance of my getting a spot of leave. You're married, Matheson, aren't you?'

'Yes, sir—my wife's in Murree.'

'Hmm. Not much of a spot, but it's better than Waziristan! Well, as I said before, I hope you have no difficulties here and that we can relieve you soon.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'Look here—what about coming to our mess for a drink this evening—about seven—you know the

Brigade mess—it's in the centre of the camp outside there—and bring that nice subaltern of yours, what's his name?'

'Morrison, sir. Thanks very much. We'd love to come.'

'Right. Well, we'll see you this evening.'

That afternoon John was shown all round the fort by the Indian police officer commanding the Frontier Constabulary detachment. He inspected the defences and the general lay-out of the place.

The fort was square in shape and its thick walls were made of mud. The roof was flat with a crenellated wall all round, in which a loophole had been cut every yard. There was a high observation tower at each corner of the roof. It was built on open ground. To the west, about five or six hundred yards away, were the foot-hills, and behind them the hills rose higher, and ever higher. Between the foot-hills and the fort was a small stream. In the opposite direction and to the south was a plain, which stretched away in the distance.

'Had much trouble here lately?' he asked.

'Not much, sahib. Every now and then a few men snipe at night, but the bullets either go over the fort or hit the wall. We've not had any one hit inside the fort, but the other day one of our men was killed, getting water from the stream. It was broad daylight, but, even then, we couldn't see who had fired the shot. These Mahsuds know how to conceal themselves, sahib.'

'Yes, they do. The fort looks safe enough. A hundred men could hold it against an army of tribes-

men without guns. What I don't like is the water-supply being outside the fort. Are there no means of storing more water in the fort ?'

'Not that I know of, sahib.'

'I'll have to think something out. It was all very well for you with your small detachment. How many is it you have ? Twenty men, isn't it ?'

'Yes, sahib. Twenty-one with me.'

'Well, I've got over a hundred altogether including followers, which makes a big difference.'

When John got back to his room in the fort, he found some letters had been sent over from the Field post office.

'Good,' he said to himself. 'One from Anne.' He tore it open.

'Life goes on much the same here,' she wrote. 'I think and think of you, Johnnie, and pray that it's not too beastly for you and that you are well. Of course all sorts of rumours are floating round, mostly unpleasant ones. So many people seem to delight in retailing hateful gossip when they are not sure of the true facts. They must know that it hurts. Anyhow, I refuse to believe any of these horrible stories of disasters and all that. I'm going to go on believing that this show will close down shortly and I'll have you back with me very soon now. Johnnie, I've got a great bit of news for you. I know you'll be pleased, and as for Mira Baz, I can just imagine his pride and happiness. His wife produced a magnificent baby boy yesterday. He's an absolute whopper—well over nine pounds—so he's taken after his parents—in weight at any rate . . .'

‘Mira Baz,’ he shouted. ‘Come here.’

‘Sahib,’ Mira Baz replied, coming hastily into the room from the veranda. His face was beaming and he held an open letter in his hand.

‘I’ve just had a letter from the mem-sahib, and she tells me that your wife has given birth to a child—a regular giant of a boy—weighs over nine pounds. Isn’t that splendid?’

‘I, too, have had a letter from Abdul giving me the great news,’ he said, trying hard to stem the note of excitement in his voice. ‘God has been good to me. Allah be praised. In my great happiness I am not unmindful of your kindness to me, sahib. Every day you add to this kindness. I live in hope that sometimes, somewhere, I shall be able to repay this load of debt under which you have placed me.’

That evening John and Morrison visited the Brigade mess tent.

‘Everything all right in the fort, Matheson?’ the Brigadier asked.

‘Yes, I think so, sir. I’m still a bit worried about the water “bundobast”.* The Constabulary officer tells me that he had a man hit the other day when drawing water from the stream. If a large “lashkar”§ gathered in the foot-hills they might make it a bit hot for men going outside the fort to get water, and then we’d be down to our reserve supply. I’m going to see if I can get hold of some receptacles in which to store water in addition to that in the tank. You never know that we won’t be confined to the fort for some days.’

*Arrangement. §Gathering of tribesmen.

‘I hope that won’t be the case, but you never know what may happen, and you have always to be prepared for the worst. I think you’re wise to collect as much water inside the fort as possible.’

‘The Constabulary officer tells me he is leaving some mounted sowars with me. Is that correct, sir?’

‘Yes, he’ll be leaving three sowars. They might come in useful.’

John looked at his watch.

‘We ought to go back now, sir. Thanks very much for the drink. I’ll see you to-morrow morning when you leave.’

‘Well, good night, Matheson—good night, Morrison. An early start to-morrow—the main body leaves at half-past six—I’m afraid it will be an infernally hot march.’

‘Good night, sir.’

‘What do you think of it all, Tom?’ John asked his subaltern as they walked back to the fort together.

‘It’s a grand show—so much nicer being on our own like this. I hope these Mahsuds come along. We’ll fairly make them sit up, won’t we?’

Tom Morrison had joined the battalion just over a year ago. A thoroughly good lad, who possessed the gift of enjoyment to a remarkable degree; he was interested in his work and in the men, and he excelled at all games, which helped to increase his popularity with the Indian ranks.

‘Yes,’ John replied. ‘We’ll give them a hot time, Tom, if they try to attack the fort, but I can’t believe they’ll be so foolish as to do that.’

They went through the gate of the fort and into the courtyard inside.

‘I want to see the Indian officers in half an hour, Tom. You might go and tell them, will you?—I’ll see them in the veranda outside my room.’

‘Right—I’ll go and warn them now.—Would you like me to be there, too?’

‘Yes, please.’

When he saw the Indian officers later, he explained to them the present situation as far as he knew it, and the general arrangements he had ordered for the defence of the fort. He particularly stressed the necessity for conserving the water-supply. As there were only two chairs in the room, the Indian officers sat on the ground in front of him.

‘I have got no information of any enemy lashkar in the vicinity at present,’ he said, speaking in Hindustani. ‘But that does not mean that one will not arrive later. If a large body of tribesmen does come here to invest the fort, they would find no great difficulty in diverting the stream. As you know, the stream comes down from the hills, so they could divert it somewhere farther up the valley and out of range of rifle-fire. If that did happen, we should then have to depend entirely on the water-supply in the fort. On no account is the water in the tank to be used without my orders. A sentry is being posted on the tank. To-morrow morning, Morrison sahib will collect every available bucket and receptacle in which water can be stored, and will arrange to have

these filled at the stream outside in order to increase our water reserve.'

Then turning to Morrison, he said, 'You may not have understood all I've said to the Indian officers, but I'll explain to you later what I want you to do about collecting more water inside the fort.

'There is no doubt about our ability to defend this fort,' he went on. 'We have got food to last us a month—it is only the water-supply which worries me at present. You may think I have painted a very gloomy picture, but one has always to be prepared for the worst. I'm afraid the men are rather cramped in their quarters, but that cannot be helped. Anyhow, it is so hot that they will be better off sleeping in the courtyard outside rather than in those stuffy rooms. That is all I have got to tell you. Are there any questions any one would like to ask?'

They remained silent.

'Right—that is all then. Oh, by the way, keep the men interested—do not let them get bored. When they are not at work, make them play games of sorts, or do something—it does not matter much what they do. It is very easy for them to get dispirited cooped up in a fort, and we cannot move any distance away from the vicinity of the fort. So keep them going and do not let them lie about doing nothing.'

The Indian officers rose to their feet, saluted and left the room.

'Phew! It's damned hot,' he remarked, wiping his forehead with his handkerchief. 'I must get some sort of a punkah rigged up to-morrow. Well, Tom,

this is what I want you to do to-morrow morning, and you must get to work directly the main body of the column leaves.....' And he explained what Morrison was to do.

The next morning John saw the column off on its return march. He felt pleased at the thought of having an independent command.

Chapter XII

THE SIEGE

THE first few days of their occupation of the fort passed peacefully. Except for the intense heat, life was rather pleasant. All ranks enjoyed the comparative rest after the strenuous time they had had since the battalion had arrived in Waziristan. No shots were fired in the direction of the fort, and the country-side appeared to be empty of human beings.

On the evening of the fourth day, some men were kicking a football about quite close to the fort wall. Suddenly the sound of a shot was heard, and a bullet just missed a man, throwing up the dust at his feet. This was the signal for a hurried move into the fort. That night several shots were fired from the hills.

The following morning, as the water-piquet went out as usual to take up its position to protect the water-parties, it was fired on. However, the enemy was firing at very long range, so that no damage was done. Next morning it was discovered that the enemy had diverted the stream during the night.

As Brigadier Carden had foreseen, the tribesmen soon realized the importance of the stream to the defenders of the fort. Mahsuds seldom miss an opportunity, and this one seemed palpably obvious.

They found no difficulty in diverting the stream from farther up the valley and out of sight, so that it still flowed past the western face of the fort, but at a greater distance from it—a tantalizing distance. It now moved down a small nullah along the base of the foot-hills, so that any people attempting to draw water from it were at the mercy of enemy riflemen in position on the hill-side. These enemy riflemen were themselves out of range from the fort.

Morrison reported the situation to his company commander.

‘Damn,’ John exclaimed irritably. ‘Of course it was bound to happen if a lashkar did come on the scene. It was certain that Mahsuds would realize the importance of that water to us. I’d like to meet the chap who built this fort with no well inside! If we only had some guns we could shell those blighters off the hills—as it is we are powerless.’

‘Absolutely. We’ll now have to use our water reserve.’

‘Yes, we shall. Look here, Tom, go along now and make quite certain that the tank is full, and also that the extra water in the buckets is as it should be. Come back here and let me know.’

Later, Morrison returned with a glum expression on his face.

‘Well,’ John asked sharply, ‘is everything all right? Why are you looking like that?’

‘I’m afraid the tank is not quite full,’ he replied. ‘Nor are the buckets.’

‘What?’ John shouted. ‘Not full! But I’ve had a sentry on that water. No one could have touched it.’

For a while he remained silent, thinking.

‘My God!’ he said at last, ‘I’ve not taken into account the evaporation in this great heat. Even though the tank is closed, it can’t be anywhere near air-tight—and it’s above ground. If it had been buried it would have helped a lot. What a damned fool I’ve been not to inspect the water every day. Has the water decreased much?’

‘No, not a great deal. The tank is still well over three-quarters full, but there’s not as much there as when we filled it the first day.’

‘Anyhow, it can’t be helped,’ he said resignedly. ‘Please arrange for a fatigue-party to be ready at once with picks and shovels. I’m going to have a pit dug for that water-tank, which will lessen the evaporation.’

A further problem arose an hour later. The signaller had just put his helio into position and was preparing to send the morning situation report. There was the sound of a rifle-shot from the hills, and a bullet smashed the helio. Matheson changed the position of the signal station and was able to send his report. He added, however, that there was no cause for alarm, as he had ample food, water, and ammunition in the fort for several days, and he was convinced the lashkar would disperse shortly.

That night, when the signaller was about to send the situation report from the new signal station, a burst of fire wounded him and knocked out their only lamp. The enemy had realized that messages could only be sent from the roof of the fort.

Matheson again changed the position of the signal station, and had a parapet made of sandbags shielding

the signaller and their only remaining helio from the direction of the hills. However, the enemy must have anticipated his doing this. No sooner had the helio been put into position, and before the signaller had started to send his message, there was a volley of fire from the plain in front. The signaller was shot through the head and the helio was put completely out of action. The tribesmen had fired from pits in the plain about six hundred yards away. They had dug these pits during the night.

Matheson was now entirely out of communication with the outside world.

Even now the situation did not worry him particularly. He knew they were safe inside the fort and could beat off any attack. It was merely a matter of keeping inside the fort, doubling the number of sentries on the walls, and waiting for a relief force. There seemed no cause for alarm. When no situation report was received at headquarters, it would be understood that something had happened. Of course, there was not a great deal of time in hand. The water shortage complicated matters. Even if the tank was entirely full, it would only be sufficient for about twelve more days, but, as it was, they would run short in ten days or so.

‘The Brigade camp is five days march from here,’ Matheson said to himself. ‘No, there’s not much time. In fact, there’s devilish little, unless they start at once. Anyhow, I expect the lashkar will disperse in a day or two. They seldom stay out more than ten days and they have been round here two days now—this is the third day. Yes, it ought to be all right, but I must watch that water like a cat.’

He sent for Morrison and the Indian officers.

The remainder of that day and the next passed comparatively calmly. A few shots were fired from the hills at night, but they did no damage, either going over the fort or smacking against the wall.

The enemy tribesmen could be now seen clearly. The foot-hills seemed to be swarming with them. Their attitude was noticeably bolder, as they knew they were out of rifle-shot range from the fort. As far as could be seen their numbers were considerable.

Through the loopholes, the two officers searched the hill-side with their field-glasses.

‘There are a hell of a lot of them,’ John remarked. ‘Do you see that chap with a long, red beard, standing up and haranguing a crowd of them sitting on the ground in front of him?’

‘Yes—there’s a small fellow with a limp just walking towards him.’

‘I expect they’ve been joined by some Wazirs by now. I only hope another lashkar doesn’t turn up to relieve the first one that arrived.’

John did not like the look of all those tribesmen hanging about doing nothing. They reminded him of a flock of vultures sitting about near a dying animal, but keeping at a distance until death would allow them to approach the carcass in safety, to gorge themselves to their full. He shuddered slightly at this thought.

He had rationed the water. It was now only to be used for drinking purposes. An Indian officer was detailed to issue water at stated times and each man received an amount which was considered necessary. It

was the intense heat that increased the discomfort considerably. Not only did it cause thirst, but it made the inside of the fort muggy and stifling.

The spirit of the troops was still high. They laughed and chatted amongst themselves. But it was difficult to find enough for them to do, so that, with the enforced idleness and the small space in which to move about, time was apt to drag heavily on their hands. It was impossible to forget the scarcity of water. Being confined to the fort in the hot weather, there was a horrid feeling that the walls were gradually closing in on them.

Chapter XIII

JOHN MATHESON IN DIFFICULTIES

THIS was the ninth day of the siege.

As far as Matheson could estimate, there was only enough water for the present garrison in the fort for two days. If he reduced the ration, which was already not generous, it might last for three days, or possibly for four. It was the intense heat that aggravated thirst to such an alarming degree. Not a cloud showed in the sky, so that the prospect of rain could be ruled out. Food they had in plenty.

Some of the men were suffering from a mild form of dysentery, but, generally, they were in good spirits and had not lost heart. The Indian officers were setting a splendid example and were keeping the men employed as much as it was possible. One evening they held a sing-song for all those not on duty and, on this occasion, the funny man surpassed himself. His jokes were of so low an order that the men laughed until the tears streamed down their cheeks. It was decided to hold a concert every evening. It would not only help the men, for the time being, to forget they were in a state of siege, but, the sounds of revelry being heard outside, would show the tribesmen that they were in no way down-hearted.

It was curious, and very annoying, that more news had not come from the Brigade. It would have been pleasant to know when the relieving force was to be expected—in fact, it was very necessary at this juncture. On the fourth day of the siege, an aeroplane had circled over the fort, but, apparently thinking all was well, had flown off again. The following day another aeroplane had come but had been so heavily fired on that it made off in a hurry, which suggested that it had been hit.

‘You see,’ Matheson said, ‘the Brigadier probably thinks there is no cast-iron hurry in getting here. He relies on our having water for at least a fortnight and only nine days have gone by.’

‘He’s probably on his way here now.’

‘Quite possibly, but I wish to goodness I knew.’

Matheson had already ordered the destruction of all horses and mules. He hated doing this, but, after carefully turning the question over in his mind, he had come to the conclusion that it was necessary. The animals drank a considerable amount of water that was needed by the men.

‘I thought I heard the sound of guns in the distance this morning,’ Morrison remarked. ‘But, of course, it may have been pure imagination.’

‘That’s rather curious. I also heard something which might have been gun-fire—at about seven o’clock.’

‘Yes, it was about that time. By Jove, that must mean they’re on the way.’

‘Possibly—yes—but it may not have been the sound of guns, and, even if it was, they were a very

long way away. The Brigade may have been checked in their march. Who knows? There's not much time to spare. No, I don't like the look of things at all.'

John Matheson and Tom Morrison were studying a map on the table by the light of a badly trimmed hurricane lamp. The room was poorly furnished. Two cane-bottomed chairs, a writing-table, a camp-bed, a rickety-looking dressing-table, and a small wooden wardrobe were the only articles of furniture in it. The mud floor was devoid of covering; the walls were dirty and crumbling.

As they sat poring over the map, the lamp threw a light on their faces, glistening with sweat, and over which was a strained, haggard look. Their eyes were dark-rimmed and slightly sunken. Morrison had completely lost his boyish expression. He appeared to have aged several years in the course of the past few days.

The muffled sound of footsteps drifted in, as a sentry walked to and fro. The drone of a bullet, as it passed over the fort, came to their ears. Some one coughed outside. The heat was abominable.

'Well,' John remarked gravely, wiping the beads of sweat from his face. He was unable to keep a note of hopelessness out of his voice. 'You see the position we're in, Tom. I've got to do something about it—and at once.'

'Yes, it doesn't look too good. Seems as if we're up against it.'

The optimism of the previous day had faded. In the afternoon, sounds, which might have been distant gun-fire, had been heard, but since then nothing more.

An aeroplane had flown over the fort in the evening at a height of about three thousand feet, had circled round several times and had then gone off in the direction of the Brigade camp. They had no means of communicating with it. The silence was ominous.

As far as could be seen, the number of tribesmen in the foot-hills had increased during the night. It looked as if another lashkar had arrived to reinforce those already there. Probably they imagine they have arrived just in time to be in at the kill, Matheson thought bitterly. 'What is to be our fate?

'I've considered the whole matter from every point of view,' he spoke slowly. 'I've turned it over and over in my mind. The result very clearly shows that in order to hold this fort for even a week longer, the number of men requiring water must be reduced. Even with a very reduced ration—really much too little in this great heat—we can only last out three more days. It is imperative that we should hold this fort. If we abandoned it and attempted to reach the Brigade, we possibly succeed in doing so—but that is impossible. The results would be too far-reaching. The tribesmen would claim a great victory and their morale, always susceptible to such influences, would rise sky-high. Small and insignificant as this fort is its abandonment would have the greatest effect on the course of the whole campaign. No, we've got to hang on to the very last.'

He paused for a moment to relight his pipe.

'Help must come soon,' he went on. 'It seems inconceivable that we are to be left in the lurch much longer. However, the point I want to stress is that

this fort can be held easily by less than its present garrison, so I've decided most reluctantly that any men surplus to requirements must leave.'

He ceased speaking and wearily passed his hand across his forehead. For a while there was silence in the room.

'Well,' he continued at last. He spoke in an almost expressionless voice, not looking in Morrison's direction but fixing his eyes on one particular part of the wall opposite him in a strange far-away manner. 'Forty men will leave the fort to-night and attempt to reach the Brigade.'

Again he paused. The drone of a bullet passing over the fort again came to their ears. The sound of a laugh could be heard from the courtyard.

Morrison swallowed hard.

'Who is to lead this party?' he asked in a low voice.

Matheson did not answer for a moment.

'One of the Indian officers—I've not decided which. The party will be composed of volunteers as far as possible. If there are not enough men who volunteer to leave, I'm afraid I'll have to detail people by name. Forty men must go—that I've decided.'

'May I——?'

'No,' John interrupted, a trifle abruptly. 'I can see you're going to ask to go. I can't allow that. It's good of you to suggest it, Tom, old boy, but you must remain here. Anything may happen to me—I may get ill or be hit or something—you never know. Then you'll

be in command. No, you must stay here. The holding of the fort is of the utmost importance.'

'I suppose you are right,' he replied reluctantly.

'You see that valley which winds its way through the hills.' He traced its course with a pencil. 'I propose that the party should go by that. It's shorter than the route we took, and, even if the Brigade is on its way here, they would meet it. I'm afraid it's hard to over-estimate the difficulties the party will have in reaching the Brigade with all these tribesmen hanging around, but there's a chance—just a small chance and—well, there it is—if they don't go, we can't last out more than three days at the outside. It's not worth taking the chance of the Brigade turning up before then. And besides——'

Some one coughed loudly outside.

'Who the hell's that?' John exclaimed angrily, getting up from his chair and walking towards the door.

Mira Baz entered and salaamed.

'What do you want now, Mira Baz?' John asked testily. 'Can't you see we're busy?'

'Sahib,' he replied quietly. 'There is a matter of great importance I wish to discuss with you.'

'Oh, well, hurry up with it, for God's sake,' he snapped. 'I assure you that Morrison sahib and I have matters of far greater importance to discuss together. Come on, get it out.'

'Once you did me a great kindness, sahib—a kindness that I shall never forget.' He spoke slowly which appeared to annoy John, who moved in his chair uneasily. 'You have continued to add to that kindness.'

‘Yes,’ John exclaimed angrily. ‘What do you want now—more water or what?’

‘No, sahib. This time I have come to ask for nothing. I have come to give.’

‘Give! Give what?’

An interested expression now appeared on the faces of both officers.

‘I have seen my sahib is greatly worried. Water is running short. The army does not arrive to relieve the garrison of this fort. Day after day it is expected but it does not come. I have watched my sahib’s face and it is the face of a man full of anxiety. I do not know English—I am an uneducated man—but I have understood. If the army does not come soon, there will be no more water left, so that it is necessary that it should come at once.’

‘Yes, we both know that—but that’s not going to make it come here.’

‘Sahib, I shall be the one to bring it.’

‘You! Bring it! What do you mean?’

‘The General sahib cannot know that you are in such difficulties. If he did, he would surely come with an army—I have no doubt of that. You cannot signal to tell him so because you have nothing with which to signal. His aeroplanes fly over you, and from that distance in the sky you appear to be all right, but you cannot tell them that you are all wrong.’

‘Yes—well?’

‘I will take a message from my sahib to the General. In that message will be written all about your situation—

that you have little water left for your troops—that it is necessary that an army should come at once to relieve you and drive away the enemy from the river. In that letter will be written that if the army does not arrive here in three or four days it will be too late.’

‘But, Mira Baz, how are you going to get there? You will be caught and killed on the way.’

‘If I am captured—well, that is the end. But I do not think I shall be. Although I am Afridi and not a Mahsud or Wazir—Allah be praised—I am a Pathan from across the British border. I speak Pushtu, but with a different accent—praise be to Allah. We trans-border Pathans know the hills—we have lived among them since birth—we can move on them in a way no British or Indian can.’

‘That is quite true.’

‘I can travel forty miles in a day and night—we Afridis walk very fast over the hills, sahib. The camp of the Brigade cannot be more than that distance away, so that if I left to-night I would reach there by sunset to-morrow. The army may already be on the march here, so I might meet it on the way, give your message and tell the General sahib to hurry up.’

Matheson did not answer at once, but sat thinking.

‘I must say it is a magnificent proposal. What do you think, Tom?’

‘It’s absolutely grand,’ he replied enthusiastically.

‘Of course, it puts the whole situation in a different light. I can now cancel my present scheme, which I don’t mind telling you, I simply loathed to even think about, much less carry out.’

He turned to Mira Baz.

'It is difficult to express my thanks, Mira Baz. I am afraid you will be running a great risk but if you succeed, and the Brigade arrives here in time, you will have done a deed, the gallantry of which will not be forgotten by the Sirkar.*'

'I do not desire thanks, sahib. It gives me great happiness that God has granted me an opportunity of repaying the debt of kindness I owe to you. Never will I forget all you have done for me and my wife. I will remember it all my life. This is but a small thing I do.'

John rose to his feet.

'Well, Mira Baz, I would suggest your going directly it becomes dark. What do you think? I will write a message and will give it to you this evening.'

'Yes, sahib, I will leave at nightfall and will move swiftly across the hills under cover of darkness. Do not fear. I will deliver your message. Inshaalah.'

Salaaming he left the room.

By Jove, that fellow's a sportsman. Where did you get him from? I didn't know he was a trans-border chap.'

'Not only is he a trans-border Afridi, but he took part in a raid, near Peshawar, two years ago, which I was responsible for bringing to an unsuccessful conclusion!' John said, smiling. 'He was badly wounded at the time. I was officiating in command of B Company, so none of the men here could possibly recognize him. In any case, I don't expect any man in B Company

*British Government.

would remember him. One or two may have seen him at the time, but he was in a dreadful state with a bullet wound through his chest, so he looked an entirely different person. I've never told any one about his taking part in a raid—didn't seem fair—as you never know but that some over-conscientious person might object to his being my servant. But now, there can be no harm in telling you. If there was anything to redeem, he is definitely doing so now.'

Thereupon he related to Morrison the history of Mira Baz—all that had been told him on that veranda at Rawalpindi, and the outcome of it.

'I've never regretted taking him on,' he ended. 'It looks now as if there was a chance of his saving all our lives. It's impossible to predict what fate has in store for us. But he'll do his utmost—of that I am sure.'

'I call it a great show,' Morrison exclaimed. 'Little did I know that we were harbouring a trans-border raider. He's a grand chap that. All good luck to him. It looks as though he'll jolly well need it.'

After dark that night John Matheson handed over the message to Mira Baz and wished him good-bye and good luck. He had told the Indian officers about it, so that they and Morrison were present in the courtyard to see him off.

'Once more I repeat my thanks,' John said quietly. 'If you succeed in your object, you will have done a great service not only to us, but to the Sirkar. If you fail, you will have done your best.'

‘Do not fear, sahib. With God’s help, I shall not fail. Salaam, sahib—salaam, “sardarlog”.’*

The gate of the fort was opened very cautiously, and only just enough to admit the passage of one man. Without looking back, Mira Baz slipped through and out into the darkness of the night.

He left behind him a great hope.

*Indian officers.

Chapter XIV

THE MESSAGE

WHEN Mira Baz crept out of the fort gate and into the big world outside, he had no immediate plan except to get clear of the surroundings of the fort as soon as possible. He knew that the most dangerous and difficult stage of his journey was the first part, for most of the enemy lashkar was certainly in the foothills to the west, but some of it might also be in position facing the other sides of the fort. They might have put out sentries to watch every point.

His offer to take the message having been accepted, he had gone up on to the roof of the fort that afternoon. Here he had got an excellent view, not only of the surrounding country, but also of several miles of the country over which he had to go. Looking through a loophole, he had carefully scrutinized it. He had decided on the route he would take. He noted down in his mind certain landmarks, and also definite areas to avoid, owing to their lack of cover and access to observation.

He hoped to complete over half the distance under cover of darkness, which would help him considerably. In fact, he considered that after he had got away from the present neighbourhood, he should be comparatively safe until dawn. Owing to a neutral instinct for finding

his way across country, he was not afraid of going astray. He had decided to take a short cut across the hills and not to move along the nullah by which the Brigade had originally come. He was confident that he would find the Brigade camp or meet the Brigade if it had already started.

Once outside the fort he had a wild desire to break into a run, to cover that first bit as fast as his legs would carry him. But this he knew would be fatal. He would certainly be noticed immediately by any one in the vicinity. Even from the foot-hills, which were only about six hundred yards away, his flight would be spotted if he started to run. He had noticed a fold in the ground, so he made for that. Having "removed his chaplies,"* he walked barefoot, taking the utmost care to move quietly, putting his feet down silently as does a tiger in the jungle.

When he had reached the depression, he was able to increase his pace somewhat, but he still moved with extreme wariness, and with every sense alert. The noiselessness of his footwork was amazing. Having been brought up in a country where travelling after dark is always apt to be dangerous, he knew instinctively that the slightest sound might be detected by the enemy and might bring them buzzing round him like a swarm of bees. He longed for a speedy escape from that region of danger. He realized that every minute of darkness was of inestimable value and must be utilized to the full on his journey. Nevertheless, until he was clear of that neighbourhood, his pace had to be painfully slow.

*Pathan shoe.

He arrived at the far end of the fold in the ground and crouched behind a large boulder before continuing his progress. Apparently his movements had not been observed so far. Now, in front of him, was a completely open space, about two hundred yards across. Beyond that was broken ground affording ample cover. If he could reach that broken ground he believed that, for the remainder of the night, he could move rapidly across the hills in the direction of his goal in comparative safety.

He lay down and commenced to wriggle slowly forward. Every now and then he stopped, flattening himself against the ground, and listened. Supposing he was spotted, supposing he was caught. He prayed that this should not happen. If only he could get safely to that broken ground. A trickle of sweat ran down his forehead and on to his cheek. He put his hand to his face, his fingers were wet and slippery.

Once he thought he heard something move to his right. A panic came upon him, like some one clutching him by the throat. But there was no sound now. He lay motionless, listening to silence. Three shots were fired in rapid succession from the foot-hills. Were they firing at him? Again he lay without movement. No, they must have been at the fort. He continued to wriggle slowly forward.

Eventually he crossed to the other side of the open ground without, he hoped, having been detected. A short pause there. Then he rose to his feet and stole softly away, taking the utmost care not to disturb a stone or make the least noise. He estimated that he must now be about two miles from the fort and that,

until dawn, he would meet no one. He broke into a run.

All that night he went on and on without stopping. He ran for about a mile, walked a bit, and then started running again. Over the flank of a hill, across a valley, and up again the other side. At about eleven o'clock the moon rose over the hill and illuminated the countryside, helping him on his way. He knew his direction, and was confident that he would strike the nullah farther on, along which they had marched on their way to the fort.

At last a greyness came over the sky. Soon things took shape, he could distinguish bushes and boulders. Night was nearly over.

Dawn found him well on his way. He reckoned that during the night he had completed over half his journey to the Brigade camp. He knew that from now onwards he would again be in danger. The nearer he approached the camp the more likely would he be to run into enemy tribesmen who might be lurking in the hills in the vicinity of the camp. He had been travelling fast throughout the night, so considered he should rest for a while, so as to be as fresh as possible for the remainder of the distance. If he was detected in the daytime he would have to run for his life, run so fast that he would outstrip his pursuers. It was essential to regain his strength. He sat down among some large rocks and rested with his head between his hands. So far all had gone well, but there was yet much to be done, and great danger lay ahead of him.

Now he climbed a steep, rocky hill, on which a few scattered camelthorn bushes grew. He moved

lithely and easily. From the top he would be able to see into the distance, and might even get a view of the camp afar off. At that early hour the wind was cool and sweet up there. He seemed to be quite alone on the hills.

He reached the summit, and, lying down behind a rock, surveyed the panorama spread out in front of him. Before him stretched a wide plain broken up by innumerable small nullahs and covered with dry grass burnt yellow by the sun. To his astonishment, he saw a camp not more than five miles away. Men moving about it were clearly visible to his keen eyes.

This must be the Brigadē, he thought, on their way to relieve the fort. He could now see what looked to be the advanced guard moving off. He reckoned he had travelled twenty miles during the night, but he had come by a short cut over the hills. It would be about twenty-three miles by the ordinary route, so that the Brigade had still twenty-seven miles to go. Normally, that would mean three, or possibly four, marches in this country, even if they were unopposed. But that was too long a time. The sahib had told him there was only sufficient water for the garrison for two days. The Brigade must reach the fort in two marches. It would have to hurry up. He must tell the Brigadier sahib so. He must deliver his message. He felt that his adventure was coming to a successful conclusion. He put his hand in his shirt pocket. Yes, the message was still there. It would be safely delivered.

He moved carefully down the steep slope. Although the hills appeared to be unoccupied by enemy tribesmen, he was not going to take any unnecessary risk.

In his khaki shirt and trousers he would be easily recognizable. He must take no chances.

He rounded a bend. Directly facing him, and less than twenty yards away, a tribesman sat motionless behind a bush, a rifle across his knees. For a second panic seized Mira Baz, as though a clammy hand had been laid upon his heart.

'Sterre mashe,' he heard himself say.

'Kwar mashe,' the tribesman replied, looking him up and down. 'Why do you move about the hill-side? What are you doing? You know there must be no movement.'

'I did not like the place I was in before. There was no good concealment, so I am going elsewhere.'

He walked on, his heart beating so fast and loud that he thought he could hear it. He knows I belong to the British, he said to himself. He must have realized I am not of Waziristan, my accent is different. When can I start running? I must get away from here quickly.

He walked on down the hill and round another bend. Now I can move swiftly, he thought. He broke into a run and got to the foot of the hill.

With the natural instinct of the hillman for country, he knew that a direct advance was impossible. Going by a circuitous route along a small nullah, which threaded its way across the plain, he bent forward as he ran in the hope that he would remain unseen. The nullah now came to an abrupt end. He halted, breathless, and furtively put his head over the lip to see where he could next find cover. There was another small

nullah, which looked as if it led towards the Brigade, but, unfortunately, there was about fifty yards of open plain to traverse before he could reach it. He could not guess if he had been detected so far. The tribesman had looked at him suspiciously, and it was possible that he had been watching his movements. That was all. Drawing a deep breath, he lifted himself over the edge of the nullah and bolted across the plain. As he did so, he put up a silent prayer for success.

There was the sound of a shot from the hill, and a bullet smacked against the ground close to him. He had been seen. There was the sound of a 'crack' in the air, which meant that he had been missed narrowly. They would get him before he had covered those remaining ten yards. He reached the nullah safely, but it proved to be nothing more than a small, narrow ditch. He lay down in it. The sweat poured from his body.

Now he crept along the ditch, bent almost double to conceal himself. But it afforded him little cover, and he realized that he was visible from the hill-side. He estimated that he had another two miles to go across the plain before he reached the advanced troops of the Brigade. It was useless waiting for their arrival, unless he could find suitable cover.

Cautiously he peered over the edge of the ditch. Another hundred yards or so beyond was a deeper nullah. If he could make that, he could lie up in comparative safety until the troops arrived, when he would deliver his message.

He leapt out of the ditch and dashed across to his goal. Suddenly he felt a blow on his right shoulder.

So violent was the impact that it crumpled him up, and he fell with a thud to the ground. He was up in an instant and sped onwards. He was within a few feet of the nullah when a second blow crashed into the middle of him. He felt completely stunned and just lay there. Then, with a great effort, he rolled over and over on his side until he fell into the nullah. Here he lay, his breath coming in great sobbing gasps and his heart pounding within him. His whole body was swept by such a storm of agony that he knew nothing but pain. He could hear the bullets smacking against the side of the nullah, but so deep was it that they could not reach him.

Gradually the pain lessened and a numbness crept over him. 'If I am to die! If I cannot hand over my message!' That was his great fear. He lay there with closed eyes.

He thought he heard a sound close to him, and looking up saw a sepoy walk past and above him. Yes, it must have been a sepoy. He could not have been dreaming. With a supreme effort he pulled himself over the edge of the nullah and looked about him. Everything looked misty, but, unless he was going mad, there were sepoy's passing quite close to him. There was some one who looked like a sahib. He dragged himself along the ground towards him. The sahib saw him, was bending over him. He could not see very clearly, but it looked like a sahib of his regiment.

'I have a message,' he whispered in Pushtu. 'In the pocket of my shirt. Most important.'

Then he lost consciousness.

Chapter XV

THE SIEGE IS RAISED

IT was Captain Ebden to whom Mira Baz dragged himself along the ground—Ebden, who commanded C Company of the battalion, to which John Matheson belonged. For an instant, seeing this apparition emerge from the nullah, Ebden was taken completely by surprise. Then he thought he recognized him.

‘My God, I believe it’s John’s bearer. What’s he doing here?’ He turned to a havildar at his side.

‘That is Matheson sahib’s servant, isn’t it?’ he asked. ‘That Pathan chap of his?’

‘Yes, sahib. There is no doubt of it and he is grievously wounded.’

‘He certainly is. He has had a hell of a time. Got one through the stomach and it looks as if he has a nasty wound in the shoulder.’

Mira Baz was murmuring something, speaking so low that Ebden, even by bending over him, could only just catch what he was saying.

‘He says something about a message in the pocket of his shirt,’ he remarked.

He put a hand to the pocket and took out a letter. It was addressed in Matheson’s writing to the Brigade

Commander and was marked 'urgent'. He called up one of the company runners.

'Go across to Brown sahib and say I want him to come to me at once. He is over there with number eleven platoon. Do you understand?'

'Yes, sahib.'

'Right—go as quickly as you can.'

A few minutes later his subaltern arrived.

'Look here, Brown. This is a letter from Matheson sent by his bearer, who has been badly wounded. It's probably very important. Take it to the colonel and tell him that I can spare you if he'd like you to take it to the Brigadier. Go as hard as you can—you'd better take my horse as you'll get there quicker.'

Ebden now turned to Mira Baz who lay motionless on the ground bleeding profusely, mainly from the shoulder wound. Seeing that he could do nothing for him and that the sooner he got to the ambulance the better, he sent for a stretcher.

He wrote a note to the regimental medical officer, telling him the wounded man was Matheson's bearer from the fort, and gave it to one of the stretcher-bearers.

'Give this letter to the doctor sahib when you get there with this wounded man. Carry him carefully as he is seriously wounded.'

Two afternoons later, John Matheson sat in his room, and with him were the Indian officers and Morrison. He was holding a conference. His head ached as if it would burst, and he had a nasty bitter taste in his mouth, which made him feel sick.

'This looks as if it is the end,' he said quietly. 'As you know—if I issue the usual ration of water—which is already meagre—to the troops to-morrow, our supply of water will be finished by the evening. I can halve the present amount. If so, with great difficulty and suffering to all, we might be able to carry on for one more day. I have staked everything on Mira Baz delivering that letter in time. In it, I pointed out that the Brigade must reach here by this evening or to-morrow morning at latest. Whether he got through or was caught on the way, we cannot possibly tell. At one time I had decided to reduce the garrison by forty men who would attempt to reach the Brigade—but then Mira Baz offered to take a message, so I changed my mind. The party would almost certainly have been killed on their way. The enemy lashkar appears to have increased rather than to have dwindled the last few days—there must now be at least a thousand men in those foot-hills, so it would be useless to attempt to get water from outside the fort. Can any of you put forward a suggestion?'

He paused and there was an uneasy silence. Those in the room did not look at each other, but cast their eyes elsewhere, as though they were overcome with a great embarrassment.

'There is nothing to be done. Your Honour.' It was Subedar Alim Khan who spoke. 'It is the will of God. We have upheld the "izzat"* of the Sirkar. Let us go on doing so to the end. Reduce the water so that we can hold the fort for another day. Then it is over—but the enemy will only enter this fort over our dead bodies.'

*Honour.

“‘Shabash’,* Subedar sahib,’ John exclaimed. ‘I believe that is all there is to be done.’”

There was the clamour of people chattering excitedly in the courtyard.

‘What’s all that noise about outside?’ John said wearily. ‘Sounds like a row going on, Tom, you might go and see what’s . . .’

A N. C. O. burst into the room, his eyes brimming with excitement.

‘Sahib, sahib,’ he shouted. ‘There are troops to be seen in the distance—coming this way. The army is coming.’ •

At that moment there was the sound of gunfire, followed by a distant rattle of musketry.

‘My God,’ John exclaimed, ‘it’s the Brigade—it must be—we’re saved. Come on—we’ll be able to see from the battlement.’ He dashed out of the room and up on to the roof.

Not more than a mile away could be seen men advancing in extended formation over the open ground. Looking through the loopholes, the sepoy of the garrison chattered to each other in happy excitement.

‘Thank God,’ was John’s only comment. He now felt desperately tired, so tired that he wished only to lie down on the ground and go to sleep. But that feeling was only momentary and he became as excited as the others at the sight of the advancing Brigade.

He looked across towards the hills to the west. Here, was much movement. From his vantage-point on the roof, the foot-hills seemed to be alive with tribesmen moving stealthily into position.

*Well done.

As the leading troops of the advanced guard came into the open, the first enemy shot rang out, to be followed by many others. However, the range was long and most of the shots went wide of their mark. The advanced guard now halted. A short while later, a movement farther back in the Brigade was noticeable and what looked to be a battalion was seen moving off to their right.

‘That battalion must have been sent off to carry out a flanking attack. Do you see, Tom?’

‘Yes—it’s simply grand,’ he replied exultantly.

Now the mountain battery opened fire on the foot-hills. They could see the shells bursting and tribesmen running to and fro as though in a panic. From where they were, they got an excellent view of the battle in progress. The advanced guard continued its advance under cover of the guns of the mountain battery and moved steadily forward in extended formation. By the time the battalion, carrying out the turning movement, had reached within six hundred yards of the foot-hills, the tribesmen were in full flight. The guns now lengthened their range. Before darkness had set in, Brigadier Carden had established two strong piquets on the hills previously occupied by the enemy and overlooking the stream. Water-parties now went out from the fort to replenish the supply. Not a shot was fired at them. Once again the tribesmen had vanished into the thin air.

The Brigade went into bivouac outside the eastern face of the fort, weary after two forced marches, but pleased with its success. Although the enemy, following their usual tactics, had not stood against their

numerically superior and better-armed opponents, they had suffered severe punishment. Possibly the day's action had helped to bring the conclusion of the campaign a bit nearer. Who could tell? The Mahsuds and Wazirs are intractable foes.

That evening John told his story to Brigadier Carden over a much appreciated whisky and soda.

'Well, Matheson,' the Brigadier remarked. 'Better late than never, but I'm afraid I ran things rather fine. There have been some important operations going on in North Waziristan—a round-up of some big gang of Wazirs—incidentally, I believe, very successful. Anyhow, it meant that every available plane was wanted over there, so that, except for an occasional flight, I could not call on them. I got one report that a plane had been heavily fired on from the hills to your west, but even then I did not worry unduly. You said in your last message that you had ample food and water—I believed you had water for fourteen days at least, possibly for more, as you said you would arrange for an extra reserve supply. I knew that, from a defence point of view, you were safe. Although communication had broken down, that did not mean necessarily that you were in desperate straits. I left my camp three days ago intending to get here in two days' time. I realize now that that would have been a day too late. In fact, if it had not been for that Pathan servant of yours, what's his name?'

'Mira Baz, sir.'

'Well, if it had not been for Mira Baz getting through with that letter, you and your company would have been completely up the spout. By Jove, he's a

gallant chap—that. You should have seen the mess he was in—damned badly wounded in two places. I only hope the poor chap doesn't die.'

'I'd be terribly sorry if he doesn't pull through, sir,' John said feelingly. 'Particularly after all he's done for us.'

'Yes, it would be too bad. I'd like to put his name in for an award of sorts. You might forward a recommendation to me, Matheson, will you? What do you think he'd like best? A medal or what?'

'I'm pretty certain he'd prefer a monetary reward, sir.' Then after a short pause, he added, 'I'd like to tell you his history, if you will promise, sir, that you won't let it go any farther. I think it would interest you.'

'Yes, do, but before you start, let's have the other half—you haven't had a whisky and soda for a long time—do you good.'

'Thanks very much, sir.'

Matheson then told him about the raid near Peshawar and the subsequent history of Mira Baz.

'Well, I'm damned,' the Brigadier exclaimed, laughing. 'He's a stout-hearted fellow—there's no mistake about that. Of course, I won't tell a soul about it—never know with these chaps in high places—they might turn down the recommendation on the grounds that he was once a raider and ought to be in prison—or something silly like that.' He put his glass to his lips. 'Well, here's to Mira Baz and his complete recovery. Yes, I think a reward of money would be the most suitable thing—and I hope it's a substantial amount—he's a really deserving case.'

‘He certainly is, sir. If it hadn’t been for him I and my company would have been finished and this fort would have been in the hands of the Mahsuds.’

‘I’ll see he gets something good. You can trust me, Matheson. In the meantime, let’s hope he recovers. Of course, these tribesmen have marvellous powers of recuperation—so unless he’s been hit in some vital place, he ought to stand a good chance.’

Although Mira Baz knew nothing about it at the time, he was lucky for two reasons. He was wounded within a mile of the Brigade standing-camp and that camp was close to the main road. If it had been otherwise, his chance of survival would have been negligible. There was still one more factor in his favour. When he was carried on a stretcher into the camp hospital with a note from the Brigadier ordering that every care should be taken of him, the medical officer in charge was superintending the evacuation of patients to the permanent hospital at Bannu. Ambulance lorries were at that time waiting on the road for this purpose.

As the doctor cleaned and dressed the two wounds, Mira Baz lay inert. His eyes were half open and the pupils were much dilated. Although he groaned softly and rolled slowly from side to side, he was unconscious. His lips were bloodless and the skin of his face looked like brown wax.

The doctor shook his head.

‘I don’t like the look of him at all,’ he said to the sub-assistant-surgeon by his side. ‘His pulse is bad, but, curiously enough, the breathing is comparatively regular. You feel his pulse.’

‘Yes, sir. It is very weak.’

‘The shoulder is nothing to worry about—the bone is broken, but that won’t kill him. The danger lies in the stomach wound. The bullet has passed right through. Of course, it may not have hit anything vital. I’ve seen the most extraordinary cases where a bullet has gone in at one side and out the other and the man has practically recovered in a fortnight—but I never like stomach wounds. Anyhow, his only chance is to get to the hospital at Bannu as soon as possible. Have him taken straight across to the ambulance lorry—send an orderly with him with instructions that he is to ensure that the patient doesn’t move at all—most important—he may become conscious later and start rolling about—he’s got to lie absolutely motionless throughout the journey. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘I’ll write a note to the officer commanding the hospital telling him about this case, which the orderly can hand over on arrival—see that the ambulance does not start without it.’

‘Very good, sir.’

Mira Baz knew nothing about that motor drive. He travelled along the great circular road linking up Dera Ismail Khan, Manzai, Jandola, Razmak, Mir Ali, and Bannu—passing numerous forts on the way. A road with many twists and turns. He lay on his back looking up at the ceiling of the ambulance with unseeing eyes, impervious to pain.

For over a week, he hovered between life and death at the Bannu hospital. Then consciousness came to him, and with it a great pain—so great that his body stiffened as it went through him and his face became

distorted. He raised his hand and beckoned weakly to a doctor who was in the ward at the time.

‘Where am I?’ he asked in a whisper.

‘You are in hospital,’ the doctor replied gently. ‘Do not worry. You are going to get well again.’

‘Hospital?’ he repeated dully, and then intelligence showed in his eyes. ‘Yes—yes, of course—was that message given to the General sahib?’

The news of the message and the raising of the siege of the fort had already travelled to Bannu, so that the servant, who was the hero of the occasion and who lay in a precarious condition in the hospital, was now a topic in the station.

‘Yes, it was,’ the doctor answered. Everything went off successfully and the enemy were driven away from that fort. Now lie quietly and try to go to sleep.’

‘Allah be praised,’ Mira Baz murmured. Closing his eyes he sank into a sound sleep.

Chapter XVI

MIRA BAZ IN HOSPITAL AGAIN

MIRA BAZ lay comfortably in bed in the Indian Military Hospital at Rawalpindi. After a stay of over two months at Bannu, he had been transferred there. The pain, which had been incessant for week after week, had now left him, and his wounds were healing satisfactorily. Although still too thin, the haggard look had left his face. Life had once again become a matter of interest.

As he lay there, he mused on the vagaries of fortune. So much seemed to have been crammed into the last two years—more than in all the other years of his life put together. So much of it had been hateful, almost unbearable, but that which had been good had more than made up for the bad time. He had an overwhelming desire to see Ziarigula again, and to get a first glimpse of his son. They were in Murree now with Matheson mem-sahib, but would doubtless come to see him soon. That was something to look forward to. Wah, life was indeed good, he thought. He lay there in contented tranquillity.

He spent his time thinking of the past and hoping for the future. It was a pleasant occupation. How his life had changed. Just over two years ago he was a patient in a British hospital, as he was now, but under

such very different conditions. Then, he had been a prisoner, and his feelings were those of a trapped animal. His plans had miscarried, and despair was his constant companion. Now he was something of a hero, and was being treated by the hospital staff almost as an honoured guest.

He could see no particular reason for this change of fortune. He had always tried to do what he thought was both right and sensible. Everything in life seemed to depend on whether one happened to be on the winning side or not, for the winning side alone was in a position to declare if an act was right or wrong and to enforce its decision. He had felt justified in all he had done during those past two years—the raid, the shooting of Tor Gul, the flight with Ziarigula, the taking of the message. All had seemed good. Why had he been punished for some actions and rewarded for others? He sighed and shook his head. It was very difficult. There was no doubt in his mind that everything was in the hands of God. ‘La Ellaha Illillah’* he repeated to himself.

A ward orderly came into the room and walked up to his bed.

‘There are visitors to see you,’ he said. ‘They are waiting outside.’

‘Visitors?’ Mira Baz exclaimed. For me? Who are they?’

‘A mem-sahib—I do not know who she is, and there is an Indian woman with her.’

With his heart beating fast, Mira Baz leant forward and tidied up the bedclothes. It must be Matheson

*There is no God but one God

mem-sahib, and with her is Ziarigula, he thought. There can surely be no mistake.

'I am now ready,' he said. His voice shook with excitement. 'Ask them to come in.'

He was right. They had arrived.

Going up to him, Anne held out a hand, and as he took it his eyes met hers and smiled a welcome.

'Salaam, mem-sahib,' he said.

Then he looked past her to Ziarigula, who stood behind. In her arms was a bundle, which she clasped to her breast.

Coming quickly forward; she gave a curious little sound half-way between a laugh and a sob and sank to her knees by the bedside.

'Life of my life,' she murmured, bending over him. 'I have brought our baby.'

She uncovered the bundle.

'Our son,' she said proudly, holding it up to him.

For a few moments his eyes rested quietly on the baby. Then he sat up in bed. His face shone with pride and joy.

'Praise be to Allah,' he shouted, holding the baby at arm's length. 'Al-ham do'lillah.'*

'Now I will leave you two together for a while,' Anne said, smiling. 'You will have much to say to one another. I will return in about a quarter of an hour. You must not get too excited, Mira Baz, and you must lie quiet, or you will become ill again.'

*Thanks be to God.

'Happiness has never killed any one, mem-sahib. It only cures,' he replied laughingly. For him, the anxious days were over.

She crept out of the room.

It was curious how fond she had become of these two people, who had suddenly come into her life and John's, and now seemed to form part of it.

She spent the next quarter of an hour going round the other wards in the hospital. Returning, she found Ziarigula seated on the floor beside him; her hand was locked in his and there was joy in their eyes. The baby was sound asleep at the foot of the bed.

'Before we go,' Anne said quietly, 'I want to thank you for all you have done, Mira Baz. My husband has told me everything in his letter, and——'

'Mem-sahib, it was a little thing I did. I was lucky to have the opportunity to repay you in some small way for the kindness you and the sahib have showered on us.'

'It was no small thing you did, Mira Baz—I know that you did us a great service, and I, for one, shall never forget it. You saved the life not only of my husband but many others, too.'

'It was my duty,' he murmured.

'And now I have great news to tell you—news that will, I know, make you even more happy. The sahib has written to say that the Waziristan campaign is coming to an end—the Mahsuds and Wazirs have already come in to make terms.'

'Shabash,*' he exclaimed delightedly. 'That is indeed good news.'

*Well done.

'But better still for me—for us—the battalion is returning here very soon,' she said. Her eyes were shining and she felt wildly happy. 'It may be back any day now. That is why I have come down from Murree earlier than I should otherwise have done. I have to arrange about getting a house, as we gave up the one in Creagh Road when the battalion went to Waziristan and I to Murree. Also, I want to be present to welcome my husband and the battalion on their return.'

'I can imagine your joy, mem-sahib,' he said. 'As for me, my happiness is almost complete.'

'Almost?' Anne asked in a puzzled tone. 'Why almost? Aren't you entirely happy now?'

'One day I wish to see my home again—my parents—the hills of Tirah, mem-sahib,' he answered simply. 'Until I have done so, I can never be entirely happy. If it was not for the kindness of you and the sahib, I and my wife would still be outcasts without a home.'

'I understand,' she said gently. 'Who knows that something will not happen to allow you to return to your home one day.'

'It is in the hand of God,' he replied.

'Well, we must go now,' she said abruptly, hardly knowing how to answer this or whether it required an answer. 'I was told that we were only to see you for half an hour, and we have been here nearly an hour. I will come sometimes to see you,' and turning to Ziari-gula, 'your wife will visit you every day, won't you?'

Ziari-gula looked away to hide the gladness in her eyes.

'We must leave you now,' Anne said. 'Salaam, Mira Baz. Take care of yourself; lie still, and obey orders.'

'Salaam, mem-sahib. Many thanks for coming to see me and for bringing my wife and son.'

From the hospital Anne drove to Flashman's hotel, where she was stopping for the next few days.

Chapter XVII

MIRA BAZ IS REWARDED

IT was an evening three weeks later, and on the lawn outside the Rawalpindi club a group of people sat in a circle talking. The battalion had returned to Rawalpindi from Waziristan and, for the Mathesons, life had resumed its normal course. They had taken a small house in Moorsom Road and they now looked forward to a peaceful winter undisturbed by anything more serious than manoeuvres.

'Are you coming to the dance here on Saturday, Anne?' Jack Henderson asked.

'I didn't know there was one.'

'Yes, there's a dance on all right—saw a notice about it posted in the hall. The band's just arrived down from Murree and I know the secretary wants as many people as possible to roll up. Do come. It ought to be rather good fun.'

'I expect we shall. I'll ask Johnnie—Johnnie'—she leant across to him—'there's a dance here on Saturday, shall we go?'

'We might as well. What do you think, darling? Would you like to?'

'Yes, I think so, if you'd like it, too. Jack's coming. We might have a dinner-party that night.'

'Good idea—celebrate our return to Pindi. I don't know what my dancing will be like—I feel more used to ammunition boots than dancing shoes—don't seem to have danced for ages. Is there anything nice among the new dance tunes, Anne?'

'One or two aren't bad, but there doesn't seem to be anything outstanding.'

'I hear we're to have Divisional manoeuvres round Jhelum way this winter—sometime in December,' someone remarked. 'A bloke in the District office told me so this morning.'

'Well, I think they might have let us off manoeuvres after six months of Waziristan. What a life!'

'Manoeuvres will feel a bit flat—quite miss the bullets flying about.'

'You can have them, old boy. I want the next war I go on to be fought with blank ammunition on both sides.'

John saw Ebden walking across the lawn.

'Oi, Sam,' he shouted to him. 'Come and join the circle.'

Ebden drew up a chair beside Anne.

'What'll you have, Sam?' John asked.

'Whisky and soda, please.'

John beckoned to a waiter.

'Two small whisky sodas,' he ordered, 'and ask the others what they want.'

'Well, Anne,' Ebden said. 'This isn't bad, is it?'

'It's wonderful—almost feels too good to be true.'

'By the way,' he asked, 'how's that Pathan servant who was with John in Waziristan? Is he out of hospital yet?'

'Yes, he came out yesterday. He's made a splendid recovery. The doctor told me the other day that very few people would have lived with a stomach wound like he had. The shock alone would probably have killed them.'

'He's a gallant chap,' he remarked enthusiastically. 'By Jove, you should have seen the mess he was in when I saw him that morning. He literally dragged himself along the ground with his hands and lay there at my feet. The splendid part about it was that he didn't seem to be thinking of himself at all, but only of the message he had brought. Of course, he could only speak in a whisper, and it was very difficult to hear what he said, but I just caught the words "letter", "in the pocket of my shirt" and "important." When he had told me this, he just passed out. I didn't think for a moment he'd ever recover. I could see he'd got a bullet through his tummy, besides the shoulder wound, and he was losing a lot of blood.'

'It was a grand thing to do,' she answered quietly.

'It was indeed. I understand he's been strongly recommended for some reward. I only hope he gets something really good. He jolly well deserves the Victoria Cross, but, of course, being a private servant, he can't get that.'

'Yes, he deserves almost anything.'

'Anne,' John called across to her. 'Do you know what the time is? It's nearly a quarter past eight and

we're supposed to be dining with the Johnsons at a quarter to nine. We'd better beat it.'

'Oh, how dreadful! I didn't know it was nearly so late. I'll never be in time. We must fly. Good night, every one.'

'Don't forget the dance on Saturday,' Jack Henderson shouted after them.

'No, we'll be there.'

Abdul still remained as head servant in the house and Mira Baz, on his return from hospital, became a *khitmatgar*.* This seemed to be the most satisfactory arrangement. When Abdul realized he was to stay on and that no steps were being taken to oust him in favour of Mira Baz, the two servants became great friends.

'Abdul's really worked very well the whole summer,' Anne remarked. 'Of course, he had his lapses, but what servant doesn't? Generally, there was little to complain about.'

'I expect he realized he'd got to pull his socks up, or he was for the shore—I only hope he'll keep them up.—Well, darling, I must get off to the office.'

'Will you be late to-day, Johnnie?'

'No—back about one, or a quarter past, I expect. Good-bye, my sweet.'

He kissed her and getting into his car drove off.

At lunch-time John returned. Anne was sitting in the veranda and, as he got out of the car and came towards her, she could see at a glance that he had some exciting news to tell her. His face was beaming and in his hand was a large official envelope.

*Waiter.

‘Absolutely grand show, darling,’ he exclaimed, waving the envelope. ‘Mira Baz has been given a reward of a thousand rupees and a parchment certificate from the Viceroy for what he did in Waziristan. Think of that—a thousand!’

‘How perfectly splendid.’

‘Just what we wanted him to get, wasn’t it? It’ll do him proud—almost set him up for life.’

‘Oh, I’m so very glad—if only he could get back to his own country. That’s his ambition, you know.’

‘Yes, I know it is, but I don’t see how this money is going to help him there, poor chap.’

‘Let’s tell him now,’ she said delightedly. ‘Or shall we wait until after lunch?’

‘Better have lunch first,’ he replied, because there’s something I want to discuss with you about him. I’ll just go and wash my hands.—I’ll be back in a minute.’

‘Well,’ said Anne, when they had sat down to lunch, and Mira Baz had left the room. ‘What’s it you want to talk over, Johnnie?’

‘It’s about Mira Baz and this reward. Although he’s getting a fat sum from the Government, I do feel we ought to give him something. Dash it all, there’s no doubt he got me out of a very nasty hole. What do you think?’

‘I quite agree. I’m all for it.’

‘Well, what shall we give him? You decide.’

‘I like that,’ she retorted, laughing. ‘Why should I decide?’

‘All right—don’t let’s quarrel about it. But how much ought we to give him?’

She did not answer at once.

‘I’d like to give him five hundred rupees,’ she said at last, ‘but can we afford that, Johnnie? I think it ought to be some amount like that, as he really saved your life. I’d hate him to think we were mean.’

‘Yes, I think we can just afford five hundred. It runs us rather fine, but I agree that we should do him well. Right, we’ll make it five hundred.’

Mira Baz brought coffee into the drawing-room after lunch, and was about to leave when John stopped him.

‘Don’t go yet, Mira Baz,’ he said. ‘I’ve got some very good news for you.’

Mira Baz stood silent and expectant, while John took the certificate and a letter from the envelope.

‘Here is a certificate from the “Mulki Lat Sahib”* for you,’ John began. ‘I will translate it to the best of my ability. If you do not understand, please tell me.’

‘Very good, sahib.’

‘“His Excellency the Viceroy and Governor-General in India,”’ John read, ‘“has awarded this certificate to Mira Baz, private servant of Captain J. Matheson, to record his high appreciation of the gallant services in the Field rendered during the Waziristan campaign.”’

‘Those are great words for so small a deed,’ Mira Baz said simply.

‘Well,’ said John, ‘here’s the certificate, but I have now got even better news for you. I will read out this

* The Viceroy of India.

letter. It first mentions the siege and the scarcity of water in the fort, and then goes on to say: "Mira Baz, at great personal risk, took a letter from the officer commanding the fort to the Brigade Commander informing him of the investment of the fort by tribesmen, and that owing to a shortage of water in the fort, help was urgently needed. Mira Baz travelled a distance of over thirty miles through enemy country and, although dangerously wounded, delivered the letter. The fort was relieved and the tribesmen were dispersed.

"By his action Mira Baz displayed gallantry of the highest order, and showed devotion to duty and a complete disregard for personal safety, which is to be greatly commended.

"His Excellency the Viceroy and Governor-General of India has been pleased to award the sum of one thousand rupees to Mira Baz in consideration of his gallant services."

Mira Baz made as if to say something, but astonishment had so taken possession of him that he remained, his mouth open and a vacant look on his face, speechless.

'There is one more thing I want to say,' John continued in an embarrassed tone. 'The mem-sahib and I wish to add five hundred rupees to this reward, for all you did for me and my company.'

'You saved the sahib's life,' Anne put in quietly.

Eventually Mira Baz spoke.

'Sahib,' he said, 'my heart is too full to say all I should like to. I will merely repeat my thanks to you and the mem-sahib—and to God. I will now go and take the good news to my wife. There is no doubt that she will be overjoyed.'

With that he slipped quietly out of the room.

Chapter XVIII

MIRA BAZ HAS GOOD NEWS

[T was an evening about three weeks later that John and Anne returned to their house from the club. It was dark at the time, but the electric light in the veranda showed up two figures talking earnestly together at the corner of the bungalow, one of whom appeared to be Mira Baz.

'Why, that's Mira Baz, isn't it?' John remarked, getting out of the car.

'Yes, I think so.'

'Wonder who his friend is? They seem to have something very important to discuss.'

Just then Mira Baz stepped forward and followed them into the house. It was quite obvious that he was in a state of suppressed excitement.

'Did you notice that man to whom I was talking?' he asked eagerly. He was literally trembling with excitement or some form of emotion.

'I saw you were with some one, but we could not see who it was,' John replied. 'Looked a bit suspicious, if you ask me—you two whispering together.—Planning another raid or what, you old scoundrel?'

'No, sahib, nothing like that, but—but ...' he stammered.

'He stopped breathlessly.

'Yes what?' John asked, smiling.

'That man belongs to my village.' With a tremendous effort he steadied his voice, and once he had started the words came with a rush. 'He is a Zakka Khel Afridi, like I am. He belongs to China village in the Bazar Valley sahib.'

'That is splendid,' John said. 'You will have a real friend now. Is he living here?'

'It is not that,' Mira Baz answered impatiently, almost as though he was annoyed at the astounding lack of comprehension on John's part. 'This man has come from my home—from my parents. He has brought a letter from my father.'

He paused as if for some reason he found difficulty in continuing.

'I am so glad,' Anne put in. 'I hope the letter contained good news.'

'Good news,' and now his voice rose almost to a shout. 'The best news in the world, for it means that I and my wife can return to our home if you will let us go.'

'Oh, how splendid,' Anne exclaimed.

'Of course we'll let you go,' John said almost at the same time. 'Tell us more about it.'

'You will remember, sahib,' he began, 'I told you once about my killing a man called Tor Gul, and my running away with Ziarigula. I also told you that I could never return to my home, as if the relatives of Tor Gul came to know that Ziarigula was with me they would

kill not only us two, but my parents as well. We are a poor family, and there are few of us left.'

'Yes, I remember your telling me that.'

'In this letter my father informs me that the relatives of Tor Gul had restarted an old standing blood feud with another family, and they had suffered severely. The other side was so successful and killed so many that only an old uncle and a brother-in-law of Tor Gul remain. My father says in his letter that it would be quite safe to return now.'

Although Mira Baz was only about twenty-one years old, the difficulties and hardships of the past two years had made him appear considerably older, and had given him a maturity of mind and purpose far in advance of his age. They seemed to have taken away any youthful illusions he might have had about life. Now his excitement and happiness had the effect of making him become a boy again, had returned to him a natural youthfulness, so that his words came tumbling out one after the other, and he had often to stop and draw breath before continuing.

'This man, Sher Jang,' he continued, 'has been many days on his journey. You see, I could not write to my father to tell him where I was—there are no post offices in my country and I could send a letter no other way. Even if I had known of an Afridi returning to Tirah, it would have been impossible to send a letter with him, for if it was known that Ziarigula was with me, the relatives of Tor Gul would have murdered my parents.'

'Yes, of course,' John said, nodding his head.

'My father knew I had gone to Nowshera, so Sher Jang went there first. There he heard that I had come

to Rawalpindi, so he travelled here. At last he has found me.'

He paused again for breath. He was clutching the letter in his hand and now he held it out to John.

'Here it is, sahib—here is the letter. I have money now—riches—I have Ziarigula and a son,' he exclaimed proudly. He spoke in jerks, drawing in his breath between short sentences, his chest heaving under the stress of emotion. 'I am free to return home—the way is clear—praise be to Allah.' And now he dropped his voice so that there was a note of appeal, as he looked searchingly into John's face. 'All I require now is your permission to leave and return to my home.'

'Of course,' John replied without hesitation, 'you can certainly go home, can't he, Anne?'

'We would not dream of keeping you back, Mira Baz,' she said gently. 'I am overjoyed to hear this splendid news.'

'Yes, it is a grand business,' John remarked. 'All good luck to you. How pleased your wife will be.'

'Without a doubt, sahib.'

'When would you like to leave?'

'As soon as you will let me go. I shall travel by train—and this time I shall go to Peshawar and there change into another train for Landi Kotal.'

Remembering his former experience at Peshawar he threw back his head, and his body was shaken with great gusts of laughter at the idea of going there again under such different circumstances. This he thought to be a huge joke. He laughed so heartily that the tears came to his eyes and ran down his cheeks. So infectious

was his laughter that John and Anne were compelled to join in.

'Forgive me, sahib,' he said, wiping his eyes and still chuckling to himself, 'but it is so funny to think I go there now a free man. No British Government officer will dare to arrest me. Wah, it is a good position to be in.'

'There is a train for Peshawar at seven in the morning, I think,' John said. 'I know there is one at ten. Do you remember we saw the Wiltons off the other day, Anne?—It was ten, wasn't it?'

'Yes, either ten or just after.'

'We shall go by the ten o'clock train, sahib. There are one or two outstanding bills I must pay before I go.'

'Right, Mira Baz. I will pay you up after dinner to-night. I think I have got just enough money in the house to do it.'

Salaaming deeply to them both, Mira Baz left the room.

'That's an excellent business, isn't it?' John remarked. 'What about some dinner now? Shall we dine dirty?'

'Oh, let's change. I simply must have a bath. I got so hot playing tennis.'

'Right oh, darling.'

After dinner John gave Mira Baz his pay and a letter of recommendation.

'Well, that's all over,' he said when Mira Baz had left the room. 'I'm damned sorry to lose him. I liked that lad enormously.'

‘So did I, but I’m so glad, Johnnie,’ Anne said, putting her hands on his shoulders. ‘Only a few days ago I went to the servants’ quarters to see Ziarigula and the baby and I found her crying as if her heart would break. She hid her face from me and pretended it was nothing. After a lot of persuasion she admitted she was crying because, even now, when they have such lots of money, she would never again see her home and the hills of Tirah. She realized that that was a thing no money in the world could buy, and she wanted it more than anything else. Oh, I’m glad.’

‘It’s so curious to reflect that all this has been the outcome of a minor raid and my happening to notice Mira Baz at that time,’ he said, musing. ‘It’s peculiar how one thing has led to another in a regular sequence. It just shows how small events can lead to important results. Actions, which a person may think of no account at the time, may have an enormous effect ultimately on his life. In this case we helped Mira Baz to re-establish himself in the world when he was practically down and out. He followed this up by almost certainly saving my life and the lives of many others. I’m only so thankful, darling, that it has all turned out so well for each of us.’

Chapter XIX

THE VICTORY

THE following morning Mira Baz and Ziarigula left Rawalpindi for Peshawar by the ten o'clock train. The platform opposite the third-class carriages was swarming with people. Not all of them were passengers by any means, for the majority appeared to be friends and relations seeing others off. Coolies carrying loads pushed their way through the crowd, shouting raucously at the tops of their voices for people to clear out of the way. Nobody took the least notice, so the coolies just forced their way through the dense throng. A man with a hand-cart loaded with heavy luggage for the brake van had much difficulty in reaching his destination, for the crowd seemed reluctant to step aside to let him pass.

As Ziarigula moved towards their carriage, she clasped the baby tightly to her, as though she was terrified that somebody might snatch it away. She was not yet accustomed to hurrying, jostling crowds. They still left her bewildered. While she pushed her way through, either bumping into or being bumped by other people, she had an absurdly vacant expression on her pretty face.

Both John and Anne were on the platform to see them off. Abdul was also there. His face was wreathed

in smiles, but whether it was because now he saw a possible rival departing or for any other reason, only he could say.

The train was fairly full, but Mira Baz, finding a seat for Ziarigula and the baby, installed them there and went outside on to the platform to talk to the Mathesons. He was in the highest spirits and laughed and joked like one who had not a care in the world. He had bought himself some new clothes for the occasion. His turban was dark blue edged with gold; over his shirt he wore a blue velvet waistcoat, and his loose white Pathan trousers were snow white. His hair was oiled and sleek. He looked extraordinarily handsome.

'Have you got your money all right?' John asked in a low tone.

Mira Baz put his hand inside his shirt. He had the money in a small leather bag suspended by a strap round his neck.

'Yes, it is here all right,' he answered, grinning. Somebody banged a gong.

'That must mean the train's going,' Anne exclaimed anxiously. 'You had better get in now.'

'There's no real hurry,' John remarked. 'They always bang that thing about five times before the train is due to start, but you had better not risk it or you may get left behind.'

When Mira Baz had said good-bye to them and entered the carriage, Anne stepped forward and wished Ziarigula good luck and farewell.

A whistle was blown shrilly. The train gave one or two convulsive jerks, and then it slowly sidled out

of the station, creaking and groaning until it got properly under way.

Mira Baz leaned out of the window, waving to the Mathesons until he could just see them as specks in the distance. Then he looked in the direction they were moving. There was West Ridge, and beyond were the Margalla Hills. He sat down beside Ziarigula and wiped his face with a coloured handkerchief.

As the train approached the hills, Mira Baz again looked out. He saw a tall pillar perched high on the sky-line.

'I wonder what that is for?' he asked a fellow passenger sitting opposite him.

'It is the memorial to a great General sahib,' the man answered. 'He lived in years gone by and did much good for the people of this country. His name was Jan Nikal Sain and they do say that people in those days worshipped him as a saint.'

Passing through a tunnel under the hills, Ziarigula, in a panic, clung tight to Mira Baz. The sudden darkness frightened her. The baby, which had been sleeping fitfully, now woke up and wailed in terror. She was glad when they emerged once more into the open. The train stopped some minutes at Taxila station. Here they took the opportunity to get out and walk up and down the platform. It was pleasant to stretch their legs after the cramped conditions in the railway carriage.

When they halted at Nowshera early that afternoon, Mira Baz looked with interest at this place of bitter memories. However, he was in no mood for regrets. Now he looked back on that time merely as a period of apprenticeship. He had taken hard knocks here, but

they had served to strengthen his character and had led to much good afterwards.

An hour later the train steamed into Peshawar City station. They bundled out of the carriage, and now Ziarigula felt as if she was powerless, as she drifted along in the stream of the surging crowd. Once or twice she lost sight of Mira Baz, and she felt she wanted to scream. She pressed her baby tight against her side and shielded it with her arm from the buffeting of the mob. Eventually, with much pushing and shoving, Mira Baz handed their tickets over to the ticket-collector at the turnstile and they emerged from the station into the street. A line of tongas, with raw-boned country-bred ponies between the shafts, stood waiting outside. They got into one and drove towards the city.

'To the Afridi serai,' Mira Baz ordered the driver.

Passing close by the huge, brown fort, they drove through one of the main city gates. For the first few hundred yards, the street was comparatively broad, but it soon narrowed to the width of a mere alley. It was flanked on either side by houses, two or three stories high, at the windows of which people sat looking down on the passers-by. The streets were thronged with a motley crowd of people—tall, broad-shouldered tribesmen from the hills, Afghans, Yarkandis, Punjabis, Sikhs, Persians and men from the South—men of diverse religions—Hindus, Mohammedans, Christians, Jews and even Buddhists—an amazing collection representing most of the races and religions of India and the surrounding countries. The street was so narrow and the crowd so thick that the tonga had to proceed at a walking pace, the driver continually shouting to tell pedestrians to get out of the way. Khaki uniformed policemen

were to be seen every few hundred yards, endeavouring to control the traffic. Mira Baz thought it was all great fun. There was an atmosphere of general cheerfulness and it was pleasant to hear Pushtu again being spoken all round him.

Eventually they came to an open square.

‘There is the Afridi serai,’ the driver said, pointing with his whip.

Mira Baz paid him, and they walked across to the serai, where they were to lodge for the night.

The following morning they were in the train again on the last stage of their journey. They had been too excited to sleep much during the night, and excitement was still with them.

For the first hour or so the country they passed through was flat and, in the opinion of Mira Baz, monotonous. Jamrud Fort could be seen from afar, looking majestic and formidable. Beyond were the rugged Frontier hills. The sight of them gave Mira Baz a deep thrill of satisfaction.

‘Look,’ he said suddenly to Ziarigula, pointing to a small mud village close to the railway-line and road, ‘do you see that village?’

She nodded her head.

‘That,’ he explained, ‘is where I stopped the day on my flight from Peshawar. I will return one day and will reward that old man handsomely. He did me a good turn, that man, and I shall not forget it.’

They halted at Jamrud for a while. Mira Baz was intensely interested to view the fort at close range. He

well remembered that evening two years ago. Now it seemed to have been only a few days back. How careful he had been to avoid that fort and to escape observation! Wah, it was good to look back—and also to attempt to peer into the future.

Now they entered the hills. This was the Khyber Pass, and the hill-sides looked to him to be friendly and beckoning. On the tops of some of the hills he saw strong stone piquets—the heads of the sentries were visible. They were guarding the road through the Pass—guarding him and Ziarigula. How different it was just over two years ago! He chuckled gently to himself. For the most part he remained silent, looking eagerly out of the window, absorbed in the country they were passing through.

The railway-line, rising gradually, twisted and turned through the hills. The engine, a plume of black smoke flying from its funnel, manfully stuck to its task of pulling the train up the steep incline. The line generally lay close to the main road. Afghan or Powindah caravans were often to be seen—heavy shaggy camels laden with merchandise from Afghanistan for the markets of India, and even for Europe. Perched on top of some of them were women and children. However, the men and nearly all the women walked alongside—strapping creatures of huge stature and with ruddy complexions of the colour of a ripe apple.

Eventually, with much puffing and pulling, the engine drew its heavy load to its destination.

Having handed over their tickets, Mira Baz, with Ziarigula, clutching her baby, walking behind, left the station and moved along a track which wound its

way up the steep hill-side. They were now leaving British India.

They spoke but little. Every now and then he looked back over his shoulder and said something to her, but the wind carried his words away before they reached her.

They reached the top of the Bazar Pass. She now came level with him, and together they looked down to the valley below, upon which the sun was streaming. In the distance they could see the village of China nestling under the foot-hills.

They looked in silence towards their village.

As Mira Baz stood there, memories crowded round him thick and fast. They had finished their adventure. It seemed to him now as he looked at Ziarigula and then at the valley below, that it had been well worth the risk he had taken and the hardships he had been through. He would not have wished it otherwise.

His wife and son were by his side, his parents and his home close by. He was not afraid of the future.

'La Ellaha Illillah,' he shouted out, so that the echo reverberated among the hills around.

Then they moved down the winding track which leads to the Bazar Valley.

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